

"A TALL MAN, SITTING NEAR THE WINDOW, TURNED TO MEET HIM."
[p. 9.]

THE STRAIGHT ROAD

BY

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'DICK'S DESERTION,' 'THE VALLEY OF COLD,' ETC.

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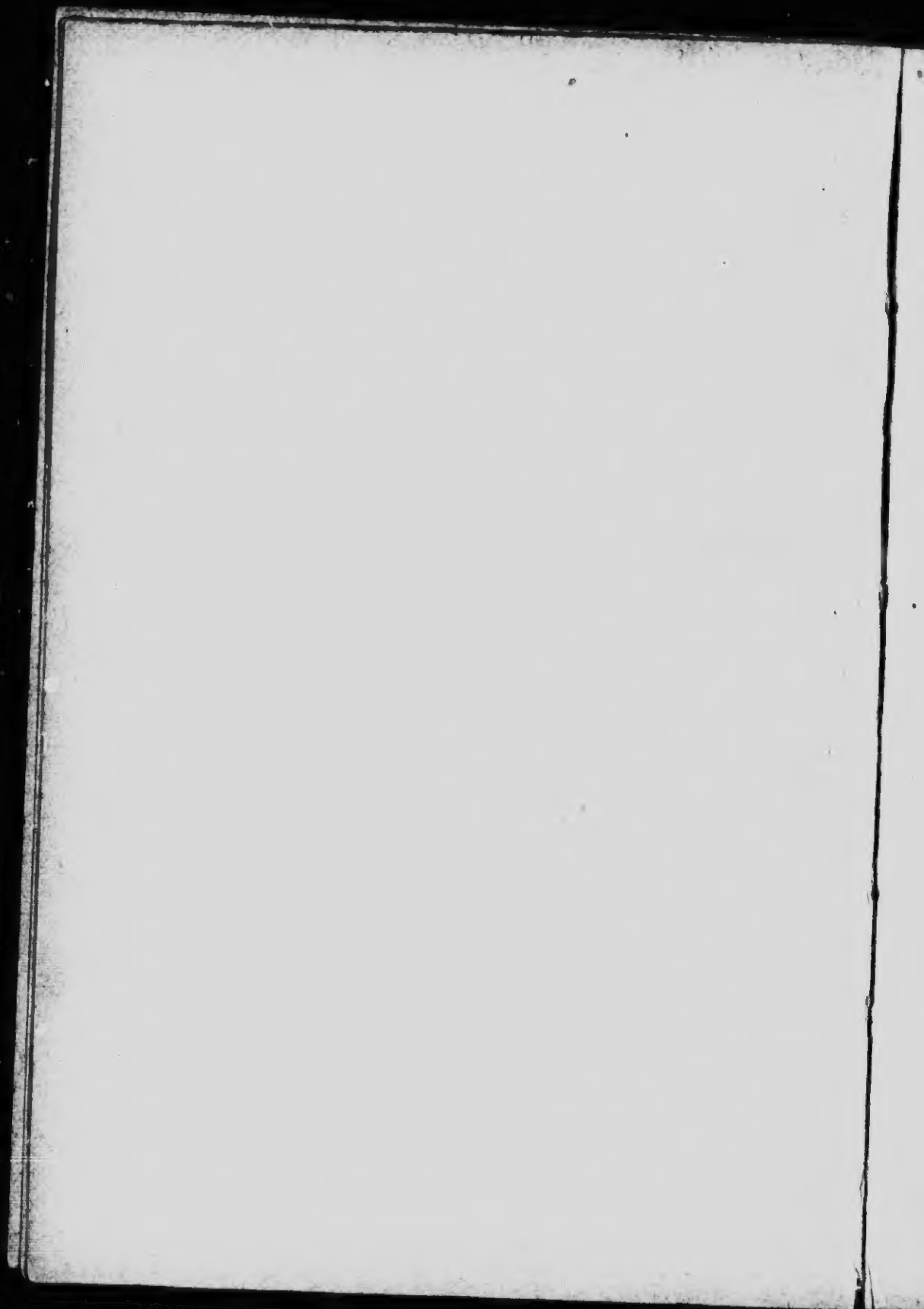
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CHAPTER I.

ALAN HOPE.

“**M**ERRICK and Price? Down that there alleyway, fourth floor in the gray stone buildin’ across the yard. Ye’ll have to take the stairs, the hoist’s broke. Ye’re welcome.”

Alan thanked the hurrying man whom he had almost knocked down, picked up his suit case, and took his way cautiously down the narrow alley. The man glanced back at him. “H’m,” said he, “Price’s nevvvy, I guess. Ain’t much their style, though.”

The mud of the alley splashed Alan’s new patent leathers; and once he had to crush himself into a dirty doorway to let a great bay horse and lorry rattle past. The buildings about were all old, shabby, substantial, grimed. He felt disgusted. He had pictured a fine office building, all red granite and ornamental iron, and plate glass, and his uncle’s name glittering in golden letters on an oaken door. The reality was different. The door, when he reached it, might have been oak. But it might equally well have been deal. And the stairs were steep and dusty.

He knocked at the nondescript door, his heart playing hide-and-seek in the tarnished patent-leathers. And immediately he was nearly startled out of the said shoes by the roaring of a mighty voice that answered him.

"Come in!" bellowed the enormous voice. "Come in, whoever you are. Open the door and walk in, and if she bucks a bit at first, kick her."

Alan pushed, but the door stuck at the top. He leaned his weight against it in an access of irritation, and Alan's weight was no small matter. It yielded suddenly, and he shot into the office with more haste than grace.

A typewriter girl giggled. Alan drew himself up and looked about the room for the owner of the voice.

A small grey-haired gentleman sat behind a desk littered with letters and blue-prints, regarding him mildly over a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses. "Are—are you my Uncle Donald?" asked Alan doubtfully.

The mild little gentleman jumped, and looked suddenly dismayed. "Good—good gracious, no, my dear fellow!" he exclaimed in a voice that would have done credit to a six-foot sea-captain. "I'm not *anybody's* uncle. You'll find your uncle inside there. Glad to see you. I'm Merrick."

Alan shook hands with the senior partner; and then Mr. Merrick lifted up his voice and hailed Mr. Price. "Hello, in there!" he roared. "Price! Here's your little nephew!"

"Tell him to come in here," answered someone in the inner office.

"He says you're to go in," announced Mr. Merrick in

a voice which boomed and buzzed in the bare office like bumble-bees in a bottle. Stolidly, determinedly miserable, Alan opened the second door.

A tall man, who had been sitting near the window, turned to meet him rather eagerly. Donald Price's keen, tired eyes took in at once the lad's whole appearance—his clever, lazy, discontented face; his fashionable though inexpensive raiment; his six-feet-one of lanky strength; and his own face showed a shade of surprise and disappointment. "Well, Alan," was all he said.

Alan held out a big white hand, from which he had just removed a correct kid glove, "How do you do, Uncle Donald?" he said, in a melancholy voice. "I am very glad to see you at last. Though it is not a very happy occasion which brings about the meeting."

A sudden smile showed behind Donald Price's sun-bleached beard. "Oh, come now," he said cheerily. "It's not as bad as that, I hope, Alan. How long have you had at the Engineering College?"

"Two years," replied Alan, with settled gloom upon his comely countenance. He felt that fate and his family were using him ill. "And I ought to have had two more, of course."

"Well, well," said Donald Price in an indulgent tone which suddenly touched Alan's most saving sense of humour, and made him feel quite a little boy—"well, that's too bad. But the practical experience will be even better for you. Come over to the light and let's have a look at you—'little nephew.' I haven't seen you since you wore tartan frocks. Your mother sent me a photo, but it didn't show your size."

Alan went over to the window slowly. He was well over six feet, but this unknown uncle topped him by an inch. He looked like a man of steel—steel-gray eyes, steel muscles, steel nerves, and indomitable will. But now his eyes were soft, perhaps a little wistful. He was a bachelor, and had been a wanderer from his youth up. Alan's mother was his only sister, his only relation in Canada. He had seen little of her since her marriage, and scarcely anything of her three children. When Alan was eleven, Donalda eight, and Ludo five, they had been left fatherless and poor. Money had been saved toward Alan's education, and he had been put through school, and had had two years at a College of Engineering. Then the money gave out.

Donald Price had given them all the help he could afford or his sister would take. He had helped—was helping—towards Donalda's and Ludo's education. He was a railroad contractor, and had fought his way up to a partnership in Merrick's firm through all sorts of desperate work and hardship. When Alan had to leave the college with his course but half completed, his uncle had offered him a position as roadman in railway work which the firm was then engaged upon. Alan, eighteen years old, clever, indolent, somewhat spoiled, had been obliged to accept the offer, though reluctantly and with much grumbling. His face, as he stood in the light of the window, was sullen and unresponsive. He felt scarcely at ease with this big, bronzed, tired-eyed man, whose voice carried such a tone of authority.

And Donald Price was disappointed in the lad. Alan thought he was ill-used, and showed it; he had had little experience of life in the imperative mood.

"He's sulky, I'm afraid," thought his uncle with a sigh. "Thinks that the soft things of life are his due. I know the kind." He had been ready to meet the lad with all the friendship and affection which, in his busy, lonely life, he had little chance of bestowing. Alan had not responded, and the solitary man was disappointed. And then, meeting the lad's troubled, distrustful eyes, he smiled again. "Why," he thought, "he's only a boy, honest and foolish, and a bit big in the head. Now he's left college he'll soon get the conceit knocked out of him. Rodman on construction work at \$1.50 per—and MacPherson leveller. It's about the best thing could happen to him."

"Don't look as if you were going to a funeral," he said suddenly, "you aren't so badly off, youngster."

"I needed those other two years," answered Alan dolefully, "My career—"

"Oh, nonsense!" broke in the bearded man. "I tell you, Alan, you're well off. I started as an axeman, and worked up to chainman and to rodman, and so on. There are many who did the same. There are lots of men who prefer a fellow who's had two years hard experience to one who's had his four years at college. You'll be all right."

The gloom on Alan's face lightened. "You've been very good to us, uncle," he said sincerely, "and I'm not ungrateful. But it was a big disappointment to me when I had to leave college."

"Just so," said the man quietly. "You'll have plenty more big disappointments before you're as old as I am. I'll take you down with me to-morrow. We go as far as Landport by the H. C. & R., and then drive forty

miles in a buckboard, back to the work. It's pretty wild country round there. How's Janet—your mother, and the others?"

"Very well," answered Alan. "Mother's told us lots about you, uncle," he went on; "ever since I can remember anything, I remember hearing about you. But she didn't give me any clear idea of what you'd look like. She only said you were ten years younger than she was, and that"—Alan's face was suddenly changed by a flash of merriment—"and that you were the sweetest little boy ever seen in a swansdown cap and your sleeves tied up with blue ribbons."

The laugh that followed broke the ice, and called in Mr. Merrick to share in it.

"Is there a thaw?" he asked frivolously of Alan. And then, not waiting for an answer, he turned to Price. "I was wanting your advice about this," he said, showing a letter. "Muir and Carlyle agree to your terms about the ties. They'll send them on to us from the limit above Trois Fleurons. Their offer's all right, eh?"

"All right," said the other decisively. "Close with it, and—keep them to it, Merrick."

Mr. Merrick nodded and went back to the outer office, where presently his thunderous voice dictating to the stenographer almost drowned the clatter of the typewriter. Donald Price drew a breath of some relief.

"Muir and Carlyle have assured us our railway ties from their timber limit," he explained to Alan. "That's one difficulty out of our way. But there are plenty more left."

And now a word about the railroad Merrick and

Price had contracted to build. A charter had been granted for it by the Dominion Government for a term of five years to a certain syndicate. This syndicate had some difficulty with its finances, and the work had hung fire for a couple of years or more. Finally, the contract had been let to Merrick and Price. No charter and no subsidy was granted by the Provincial Government, which was of different political persuasion from that of the Dominion. Meanwhile, application had been made to the Provincial Government by a rival company for a charter for a road which would run almost parallel with the original one; and, without taking the same route, would yet, if completed first, rob the original line of all its traffic. So that the watchword of all hands became "Hustle."

A thousand petty, grimy, inexplicable political reasons entered into the affair. Price, who loved his country passionately, was at white heat of indignation over the trivial, maddening delays his enemies set in his path. He fought them, but he fought fair. He and Merrick, and the syndicate kept their hands clean and grated their teeth. Their enemies did not always use the same straight weapons.

"When will Canada stop harbouring these rats in her granaries?" Price would say sometimes.

At the time this story opens, some forty miles of the road had been graded, and steel laid for thirty.

"You'll see something of the conditions when you get there," Price told Alan. "We've done a lot of blasting of late. Ever see that? It's interesting work, but there's no room for mistakes in that business. It's rocky country, and water's scarce. Takes us half of

our time and a third of our men and most of our rolling-stock carrying water for the rest. We struck an artesian well that ran for four weeks, but it's giving out. It's a big trouble. If a man know's he has two gallons of water, he'll may be drink a quart. But if he's got a quart, he'll be perishing for the other seven. Especially if he's a foreigner."

Alan listened with slowly awakening interest. Beside these hints of realities, these idle forewords of strife and struggle, of defeat and victory, the routine of the college began to seem rather flat and unprofitable. And he already felt the beginning of a deep liking and respect for his uncle.

"You've never been out on a survey or anything in your summer holidays, have you, Hope?" asked the jaunty little Mr. Merrick, suddenly reappearing. "No? lots of youngsters do. But people don't hanker after 'em. They want to be back at their Science schools and colleges in the Fall, and that means packing 'em sometimes over two or three hundred miles of back trail. Glad you're here to stay for a bit."

"Of course, all the location work's done long ago," put in Price in his quiet way. "You'll be with the leveller, setting grade pegs for the track. You'll most likely come back every night to the construction camp and sleep in a bunk, instead of under a blanket on the ground, as you might if it was a preliminary survey."

"All the same," remarked the cheerful Mr. Merrick, "you won't be in the lap o' luxury. You'll learn that there's only one man in the camp greater than your uncle, and that's the cook. The Czar of all the Russias is a constitutional monarch beside the cook." He roared

with sudden laughter that almost made the windows rattle. "Don't be alarmed," he assured Allen, recovering himself, "it's merely mirth. I have to pay my stenographer two dollars a month extra on the understanding that I'm to have my laugh out twice a day upon occasion."

"And now," said Donald Price, "what are you going to do with yourself this evening, Alan?"

"I dunno," said Allan frankly, "but I'm going to have my shoes cleaned first"—he flicked at a spot of mud on his sleeve—"and then I guess I'll smouch around town a bit."

"H'm," said his uncle quietly. He looked at the lad's clever, impressionable face. "I think you'd better come with me to my hotel," he said, "and get a brush up and a good dinner and go to bed early. You'll need plenty of sleep to-night, for you won't get much for the next forty-eight hours."

He turned away as if the matter was settled, that air of authority strong upon him. Alan did not care for an air of authority in other people. He had mapped out a gay evening for himself, and he felt rebellious. He wondered how he could most discreetly, yet firmly, give his uncle to understand that meddling in his nephew's affairs would not be tolerated by the said nephew.

"I'll be ready for you in ten minutes, youngster," remarked Donald Price pleasantly. "Can't you find a decent chair? Take the one at my desk, then."

Alan opened his mouth to begin the firm but direct speech—and heard himself meekly answer, "Very well, sir," to his own vast astonishment.

CHAPTER II.

CONTRABAND OF WAR.

ALAN tucked his chin into the collar of his smart gray waterproof coat, and shut his eyes against the stinging rain. It was spring rain, but there was no promise of warmth or young life or new leaves in it. It was straight, cold, dreary; it might as well have belonged to November.

Alan opened his eyes again as the buckboard bounded over a stump, and dreadingly watched the mare's great hoofs throwing up clots of earth and last year's leaves with the regularity of a machine. The rythmical swing of her quarters, the twitch of her mule-like ears, half fascinated him. Already he regarded her with esteem, though not with admiration. She was a pacer of sorts, and could do her forty or fifty miles without turning a hair. She could slide down the side of a ravine on her tail, with three men hanging to the rear of the buckboard, and she could swarm up rocks like a mountain goat. When the buckboard upset, she generally took a nap until it was put together again. She rejoiced in the name of Lucy Gray, and Price would not have parted with her for untold gold.

"Only fifteen miles more," said Donald Price encouragingly to Alan, "the trail gets better ahead here. Steady, lass. Steady, old girl."

Lucy wanted to get home. She cast her great jaw sideways, and pulled impetuously. The buckboard struck a root, flew upwards into the air, came down on one wheel, and tilted slowly over. There was nothing to hold on to, and Alan and his uncle rolled out in a heap. They landed upon some raspberry canes and lay breathless for a moment. Then they picked themselves up in silence. Lucy was waiting for them twenty feet away, regarding them over her shoulder with a bored expression.

The harness, what there was of it—to Alan it seemed to consist chiefly of a strap and some pieces of clothes line—was intact; or at least, no more fragmentary than usual. They righted the buckboard and climbed in stiffly.

"She generally tips me out just hereabouts," said Donald Price thoughtfully. "There's no finesse about Lucy."

The trail led them through forest-lands which had been burned over five or six years before. Now the young saplings were shooting up above the undergrowth—acre by acre, league on league, thick as grass, slender and straight as lances. They formed an impenetrable eight-foot wall on each side of the trail.

"Good stuff coming along here," said Price, "but these forest fires are the curse of the country. They're the most horrible things in existence, Alan. They smite like the Angel of Destruction in Exodus."

"Aren't there any farms or—or towns or anything round here?" asked Alan, stricken sudden. "It's a sense of loneliness of these new lands to which I had come."

"There are some farms down south," said Price, "but Landport's the nearest town." Alan thought of his brief glimpse of Landport; of the little corrugated-iron station, of the bleak hillsides where the mines were, raw and scarred, stained with minerals; of the unpainted shanties, and the electric light poles leaning drunkenly at all angles above the axle-deep mud of the streets; and he shivered. He was town-born and town-bred; but he had never seen such a town as this. He closed his eyes, and remembered the asphalt and the big houses and the shady trees; the bright stores; the red granite buildings of the Engineering College, with their big lawns and playing-fields; he thought of his little home just outside the big city, of his mother and fair-haired Donald, and Ludo. He was suddenly aching homesick; the wildness and desolation of this new world struck him almost with fear. But something in that last thought, the thought of his mother, kept him from complaint. He set his teeth and bent his head before the sting of the driving rain. The whole world seemed gray and desolate, and he alone in the midst of it.

The trail ran straight ahead of them, ever rising upwards higher and higher through the young forest, until the rain shut down upon it in a curtain of gray mist.

"But if you don't mind a few upsets," said Donald Price, "I think we'll take a short cut over the ridge." He pointed to a bare shoulder of land uplifting itself above the trees; first outpost of a stony plateau, treeless and almost waterless.

They gained the crest of the ridge after a sharp scramble, most of the time pushing behind the buck-

board. And after giving Lucy a rest, turned down the rough track that dipped up and down and wound among rocks and hillocks. The mist was growing thicker, and the gray afternoon was slowly drawing towards evening.

Donald Price looked forward keenly through the shadowy rain. "There's someone ahead of us," he said shortly, "someone in a rig."

"Is there room to pass?" asked Allan, trying to make out the dim shape ahead. "Lucy's been making such a noise jumping about among the stones I couldn't hear anything. I shouldn't think this was a very popular driveway."

His uncle's face had suddenly grown stern and anxious. He gave the mare a light touch with the whip, and they clattered recklessly after the stranger. Alan felt that his bones would all be shaken apart, and expected every moment that they would come to misfortune. But misfortune came to the stranger first. When they came up with him he was standing at his horse's head gazing ruefully at his buckboard, which had lost a wheel.

Donald Price's eyes were like steel, and his jaw was grimly set beneath his fair beard. But his voice was even and quiet when he spoke. "Well, Mr. Burke," he said, "I didn't expect to find you driving this way. You seem to have had an accident. Can I be of any service to you?"

The man swung round on his heel, his head thrust forward. His eyes gleamed upwards under the brim of his hat, and Alan stiffened suddenly in his place, involuntarily preparing for an attack. But the man's

voice when he spoke was quite jovial; though there was about as much friendship in his attitude as there is in the attitude of a wolf when it swings round to face the hunter.

"Hey! it's you, is it, Mr. Price?" he said. "I was just drivin' in to see me cousin Martin Burke that's in camp. I thought you was away in th' city." He staggered a little as he stood, and Alan saw that he was somewhat the worse for liquor. "I've lost the nut from me heel," he went on thickly, "and it'll be ill work huntin' for it a day like this."

"I always carry a couple of extra nuts in case of need," said Price politely, but with a certain rigid air of disgust, "and I can put one on for you in a few minutes."

He was as good as his word, deftly fastening the wheel on again, and hammering the new nut round with a pointed stone. Burke was lavish with his expressions of gratitude, but Donald Price cut them short. "And now, Mr. Burke," he said softly, when the other had climbed heavily into the buckboard, "I'll just turn your horse's head round and send you back upon your way."

The pretence of friendliness dropped from Burke in a flash. "Take your hands from that bridle!" he cried fiercely with a flood of bad language. "I've as much right to this road as ye have. Ye'll turn me round, will ye? I'll go where I have a mind to, and bide as I please, without askin' your leave."

"If you show your face within five miles of that construction camp while I'm in charge of it, I'm sorry for you," said Price grimly. Alan slipped quietly from his seat, knowing that Lucy would stand till further

notice, and advanced upon the other buckboard. His nerves were dancing at the prospect of a tussle, and his big hands were clenching and unclenching.

"Stand away from that horse!" roared Burke, reaching for his whip; "stand away, ye dirty scoundrel, stopping folks like a road-agent! Stand away, or I'll mark ye!" For answer, Price backed the horse, preparatory to turning it.

With a howl of rage, Burke raised the whip to lash him across the face. But it never fell. His wrist was seized by a strong hand, another hand gripped him by the back of the neck, and he was hauled out of his rig and tumbled over among the stones. Having accomplished this feat with great *éclat* and much satisfaction. Alan knelt upon his grunting foe; and held his head down, rubbing his nose into the mud when he attempted to move. "What shall I do with him, Uncle Donald?" he asked cheerfully.

"Keep them there a minute," replied Donald Price, still with that stern air of anger upon him. Alan joyfully dug his knees into the back of his enemy, and his thoughts flew back to the football-scrimmages of his old life. Burke heaved and gurgled in the mud, and his hand, beating aimlessly among the stones, stole back to his hip. Alan prisoned the hand with a sudden tightening at his heart; felt in the pocket, and drew forth a little revolver. He pressed the cold barrel against his adversary's head, and Burke immediately became still and rigid.

"My gracious!" thought Alan, regarding the shiny weapon with some nervousness; "its loaded, then! Oh, Jimminy!" He wished, with a purely boyish thrill, that

his chums Ranson and Fairbrother could have seen him at that moment, holding a gun to Burke's ear.

Meanwhile, his uncle had gone to Burke's buckboard, felt among the straw at the bottom, and pulled out a small keg of whiskey. This he carried to the rocks, and smashed thereon with vicious enjoyment. Alan watched him with raised eyebrows as the coarse spirit gushed out among the stones and mingled with the little pools of rainwater.

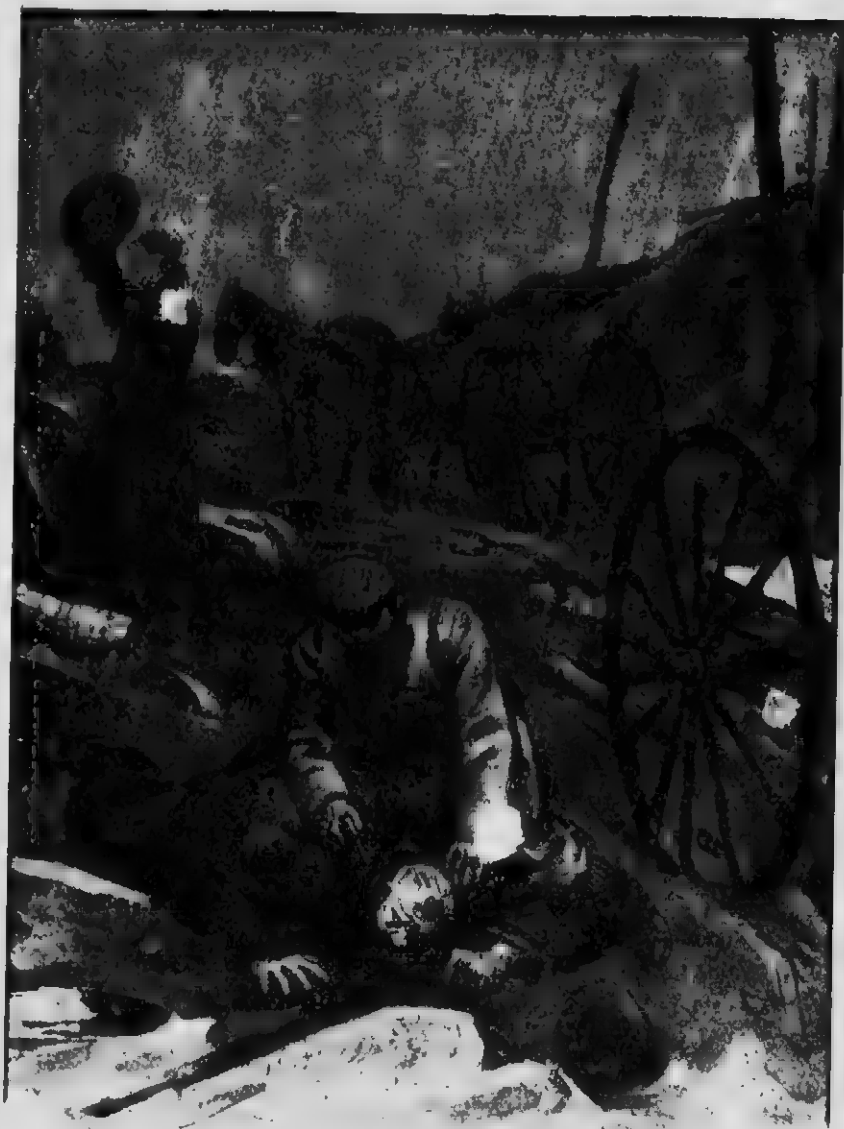
"Now you can let him up," said Price, wiping his hands on his handkerchief. Reluctantly, Alan rose and went over to his uncle. Burke crawled to his feet and stood facing them in silence.

"I found this in his pocket," panted Alan proudly. "He was trying to draw it on me, but I got hold of it first. It's loaded, uncle." He showed the little revolver.

Price took it from him and unloaded it, the cartridge tinkling among the rocks. His mouth had relaxed, and his eyes as they rested on Alan were very kindly. "You are a good fellow to have on hand in case of trouble, I can see," he said. That was all, but somehow Alan felt as if he had been decorated for valour.

His uncle gave the empty revolver back to its owner, and Burke took it without a word. "Now go," said Price sternly, "and if I ever suspect you again of trying to run your filthy spirits into my camp, jailed you shall be, if I have to take you to Landport and lock you up myself."

Burke climbed into his rig stiffly, still in silence. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was plastered with mud. He gathered up the reins and started his horse. But in a second he checked it again, and turned in the



"ALAN KNELT UPON HIS GRUNTING FOE, AND HELD HIS HEAD DOWN."

seat, and spoke quite quietly. He pointed with a shaking hand to the broken keg among the stones. "Ye see that?" he said. "Well, ye shall pay for that broken bar'l a thousand times over. Ye shall pay for every drop o' that liquor ye've spilled—ay, and pay bitterly. Ye've got me agin ye now, and ye won't forgit it in a hurry. I'll know where to sell my hate of ye to the best advantage, and you'll smart for the bargain." He was quite sober and used no bad language; but at the sound of his voice, Alan caught his breath sharply. He realized that this man would stop at nothing.

Price shrugged his shoulders; and Burke drove off without another word. They climbed into their own buckboard, and Lucy dashed off into the dim gray mist, impatient for her stable and her supper.

"Burke has a farm beyond Landport," explained Donald Price, "but he makes his living out of a sort of illicit liquor traffic. I've suspected him before of trying to run whiskey into the camp, and to-day I've caught him in the act. We've got a lot of men who are difficult enough to keep in hand as it is. With that poisonous stuff Burke sells to set them afire——" He shrugged his shoulders again eloquently, and was silent. Alan was silent too, weary with the long drive and the new things he had already met. He felt suddenly plunged into a maelstrom of warring deeds and conflicting impulses.

"Burke looked wild enough to kill you," he said at last uneasily, "but I suppose his threats were all bluff." His uncle laughed, a laugh that had no mirth in it. "No," he said grimly. "Burke seldom makes a threat he does not live up to. I have plenty of enemies, but Burke is as dangerous as any. When he's sober, the

brute has a certain force of character which makes him a natural leader among his kind. But that's enough of him. There's your first glimpse of the work, youngster."

Far ahead, twinkling out of the mist a moment and then again veiled, Alan saw innumerable little lights strung about the flanks of the hills. But the mist shut down upon the distances before he had more than a glimpse. And the loneliness seemed redoubled.

"I wonder what we'll get for supper," said his uncle earnestly. Alan was conscious of a hollow feeling, and sighed; "I could eat up anything," he said mournfully.

The gray twilight grew darker, and Lucy Gray increased her steady speed. A few trees loomed up out of the mist, and whirled past; a wheel of the buckboard almost grazed them. They dashed between great boulders, and came out upon the plateau, where the ground was more level. And here the full force of the wind struck them, and the chill rain beat in their faces and stung them. Donald Price's keen eyes searched the ground ahead; to Alan, the track was lost long ago. Once, Lucy swerved violently as they passed a pile of rock, and Alan caught a second's glimpse of a gray shadow crouched against the gray sky, that regarded them with living malevolent yellow eyes as they clattered past.

"Lucifer, I should think," said his uncle. "The cook had a brown bear at the last camp that used to come to the door and beg for scraps like a dog."

Suddenly, the lights began to grow against the mist, larger and brighter, so that they lent a white glow to the fog and the rain. There were red lights, and lights that shone on slow banners of steam. And Alan heard

a multitude of little sounds of human life, all blended together in a murmur like the murmur of a little city.

They drew up before a cluster of old railway coaches on the outskirts of the camp, and Price shouted resoundingly. A door banged, and a man came running, squelching through the wet in heavy boots.

"'Evenin', sir," he called, "ye've had a wet journey. I'll take th' mare." He patted Luoy's steaming sides, and she lipped his sleeve affectionately. "Benny had a fine pie for ye, sir," he went on with laughter in his deep voice, "made o' tinned plums, and he says the Dagoes have stolen it. He's raisin' the roof."

Another man strolled up in the rain, a man who wore a purple sweater and enormous waterproof hunting-boots.

"That you, Macpherson?" cried Price cordially. "This is my nephew, Alan Hope, your new rodman. Come and have a look at him."

Macpherson lounged forward, tall, lean as a greyhound, with a long, solemn face. Alan was not accustomed to fear the scrutiny of strangers, and awaited smilingly.

The lean man eyed him sadly. "That?" he said at length. "Heaven help us! Another college pup!" He turned and drifted away mournfully into the darkness.

CHAPTER III.

IN HARNESS.

FOR the first week or two, Alan was miserable. He hated the coarse food, the old railway car where he had a bunk with Macpherson and two or three others; he hated the sight of a level or a rod; he hated the in-offensive grade-pegs. He lived chiefly on heavy bread and stewed prunes, and dreamed wild dreams of sand that slid down upon them from impossible inclinations and pegs which wandered from their situations and had to be brought back again like strayed sheep.

And then of a sudden the hunger of an open air life fell upon him; and he in turn fell upon the endless pork, yellowish and strong, and the beans, and the boiled tea and the strange leathery pies Benny made from dried apples, and the "plum-duff" and an occasional can of corn or tomatoes, and throve thereon greatly. He slept dreamlessly. And the wild lands began to wear friendly faces for him, and the fascination of all big enterprises entered into his soul. The straggling construction camp, swarming with men, yet so small and remote under those wide skies; the rails crawling slowly on into the wilderness, linking the lands together; the gangs at work upon the sharp rock-ridges, with pick and shovel and dynamite tearing a way for the all-compelling Road; the men themselves, of half-a-dozen warring nationalities; the anxiety and haste and strain

that were in the very air—all these strung Alan's nerves to the pitch of enthusiasm. He felt his own personality merged and overwhelmed into the one great power by and for which they all lived, that they all fought for, whose servants they all were—the Road.

He grew to like the saturnine Macpherson. Sometimes, when they sat under a bush munching their pork sandwiches, the lean man's tongue would become loosened, and he would disburden himself of wild tales of the far north—of Indian tribes from the "back of beyond," of Eskimo hunters at the mouth of the Coppermine, of gold-phantoms leading men to death, of plague and heroism in lumber-camps, of hold-ups and wash-outs, until the food stuck in Alan's throat, and he could do nothing but stare with flushed cheeks and wide eyes at this man whose life would have furnished material for a library of books.

"Your nephew's not such a fool as he looks," Macpherson confided to Price, "though perhaps that's not saying much for him. I'm glad you're leaving him to himself."

"To himself—and you," said Price with a laugh. "But I think the youngster's coming on nicely. I notice that when he wants to learn anything, he doesn't come and ask me, he goes and finds out. That's a good sign, Mac."

"Ha!" said the other dourly, "that you may thank me for. He pestered me with questions till I was daft. So I said, 'You taffy-jawed greenhorn, d' you think this Road is run to get your squint eyes into line and teach you a rod at an angle o' forty-five ain't straight? Stiffen up,' I said, 'and sweat some suet out o' your

cranium and some sense into it!' I said. I told him a lot more, Price, too. First I thought he wanted to fight, and then I should have had to do him up and do without a rodman for a day or two. But he gulped it down. They collegers," Macpherson went on austere, with a sudden lapse into dialect, "ha' no notion o' authority in their superiors."

Alan scarcely saw his uncle to speak to in a week, and at first he felt rather cast-off and lonely. He did not know how clearly and keenly that uncle was watching him. He did not know that, as he learned to keep his mouth shut and his eyes open, to stick to his work cheerfully, to stand on his own feet, to fight his own battles and choose his own friends, to change the "I" and "they" of his earlier speech into the communal "we," Donald Price's heart rejoiced. Alan knew nothing of this. But he was pleased with his uncle's cheery greeting and affectionate handclasp on the rare occasions when they saw each other for half-an-hour. "Stick to it, Alan," said Donald Price. And Alan stuck to it, and wrote long letters home and saw a great deal, and said less, and became one with the Road for which he toiled. The work was certainly monotonous. But there was always the possibility of vast adventure; and the race against time, which thrilled through every part of the work; filled the air with a sense of stress and excitement.

The food was more than monotonous; but sometimes a couple of Indians would drift into camp from the forest lands they had left behind, carrying a deer slung between them; and there would be fresh venison for a little while. But in time he almost forgot that these

things were hardships. He wore a red-and-black sweater, a hat which seemed to have commenced its career as a felt wideawake, and a pair of his uncle's long boots. Sometimes he looked at his suit-case and his delicately tinted neckties and his patent leathers, and wondered half wistfully if he would ever again become used to such gay apparel.

Meanwhile the Road advanced slowly through the rough hill country. The steel rails pushed farther and farther over the bare plateau towards the outskirts of loftier ranges, and the woods were left far behind. To Alan the chief difficulties in the way seemed to be those of a natural character; he could scarcely believe those hints and rumours which from time to time reached his ears, of a powerful adversary, of a survey starting in that same district, of fraud and faithlessness. The obstacles he saw were rock and water—too much rock and too little water.

Of these troubles, the last was the most serious. The rock could be blasted into cuttings, the ridges and hollows could be levelled, but the shortage of water was an ever-increasing hindrance, and there had already been trouble among the Finns and Esthonians over the short rations. Alan never forgot that, his first sight of an incipient riot. He could always shut his eyes and see the rough, fierce men, ignorant some of them as savages, men from Kovno and Esthonia, Olonetz and Rovgorod, Finland and Livonia; elbowing each other in front of the shanty where his uncle had his headquarters, shouting their demands in a few words of English and much strange dialect. He could see his uncle standing quietly in the doorway, both empty hands in view, call-

ing for an interpreter and stilling the tumult with a little rough humour and much vigorous abuse. He could remember the crowd melting away with sheepish grins and good-feeling. He could remember, too, his uncle's face when they had gone.

"What can have started them off like that?" he had asked, surprised to feel his nerves shaken.

Donald Price had turned on him quickly. "Did you see anyone else with them?" he said. "Anyone, I mean, not of them?"

"Yes," Alan had answered, "I saw Martin Burke, standing round and looking on."

"Just so," replied his uncle grimly; "then you saw cause and effect."

After that, Alan had done a good deal of thinking, and some talking with Macpherson. "We must find water nearer at hand," Macpherson said, "or we'll have no end of trouble. There must be some water draining from all these little hillocks. But I suppose it's half a mile underground. Everyone goes hunting for water in their spare time. You and I'll go off to-morrow afternoon, Hope, and see if we have better luck. We can spare time for a bit of a holiday in a good cause."

It was four o'clock of an afternoon late in May when they left camp and struck eastward across the low, barren hills. The sky was like a great, inverted, gold-rimmed bowl above them, and the thin dry air was like the breath of life. They strode on in silence, rejoicing in their freedom, Alan content to feel himself alive, the older man drawing dry humour or shrewd wisdom from every little happening. But they found no water.

"There must be water somewhere round," cried Macpherson, standing on a hillock and waving his long arms. "There must be. While we have to go short, there may be more trouble with the men any day. And Five-Nought-Seven with her water-barrels behind her, grunting on the up-grade, has precedence over everything on the line, and that's bad for supplies. We must find that water," and strangely enough, just at the edge of sundown, they did find it.

The stony plateau towards the hills was full of sharp ridges, and deep narrow clefts cut by prehistoric rivers. On the edge of one of these clefts the level rays of the sun showed a greenness that was lacking elsewhere.

"Let's go and look, anyhow," said Alan. "Hope's my name and Hope's my nature. It'll take a good half-hour, but there'll be twilight till nine."

It took them more than half an hour's tough scrambling before they stood on the edge of that ravine. But when they did they forgot everything. Beneath them the rock dropped sheer downwards for nearly two hundred feet, and the cleft was so narrow that they could have thrown a stone to the further side. They could not see the soil at the bottom, for it was all overgrown with young trees, poplar and willow and cottonwood, all drawn out incredibly tall and slender in their struggle upward between those walls of rock to the light.

"Water—trees!" cried Alan excitedly.

"Hush!" said Macpherson. "Listen!"

They listened, hanging perilously over the brink. Faint and echoing, the drawling song of running water came to their ears. They looked at one another, and then at the sheer rockwall below.

"I'm going down," said Macpherson. "The cliff's fifty feet lower on the other side, and crumbling."

They found an apology for a path, worn in the softer rock by the feet of thirsty animals; and, at the expense of torn hands and coats, reached bottom at last. As they descended lower and lower, the golden sunlight seemed to withdraw itself further and further away, leaving them to twilight. When they stood on the bottom, panting, and looked up, the sky seemed a glowing golden ribbon, ineffably remote. Alan was struck silent with the strange loveliness of the place.

"Queer effect, isn't it?" said Macpherson. "Like the mouth of a mine. See how spindly the timber is? Come along, if you've got your breath, and let's find the water."

The water was at the narrower end of the ravine, and its deep song echoed between the rock walls. "Why, it's a regular fountain," said Alan. And it was a fountain as beautiful in its way as those of Greece and Italy, around which cluster the lore and legend of three thousand years. But this fountain had never been seen perhaps by any man save a wandering Indian hunter. The water rushed forth from a hole in the rock some fifteen feet above the ground; and fell, in a beautiful outspread curtain, to a deep basin beneath, worn perfectly smooth and round. In that shadowed place it was a clear green colour, and the basin looked like a dark setting to a gigantic emerald. After escaping from the basin, the water ran for some sixty feet between boulders, and then plunged into a cleft with a roar and was gone. Nor could they find that it reappeared anywhere.

"Runs underneath," said Macpherson, his ear to the ground; "goodness only knows how far down. Well, we've found our water supply, lad. And it means more than that, more than that. Thirst, or the fear of thirst, is too strong a weapon to leave in the hands of one's foes. A pump up on the edge there, and the trick's done. We'll team it to the camp. We've done a good turn to-day to man and beast."

Alan scooped up some water in his joined hands, and drank. It was sweet and cold, with the cold of sunless wells and black caverns beneath the hills.

"Good pressure," said Macpherson critically. "I expect there's a regular subterranean lake under there, fed by all these hills."

"See how green it is where it spouts out," said Alan, "and white like lace just above the basin."

When they told Donald Price of their discovery, his face lightened with relief. "I'll send Baxter to look at it in the morning," he said. "It's come just in the nick of time. The men are grumbling continually, though they have not suffered much." He drew a long breath and squared his shoulders. "This is the best news I've heard from anyone for many a day," said he. Macpherson thrust out his lower lip sourly. "I wonder what their next move will be," he grunted.

"If you think Martin Burke's at the bottom of the trouble, why don't you fire him, Uncle Donald?" ventured Alan uncertainly.

"I don't quite know," said Price, thoughtfully. "I think it's because I know him and can guard against him to a great extent. If I sacked him, I'd have a cleverer scoundrel to deal with perhaps."

"You're too cautious, man," growled Macpherson. "Ye wait too long for your proofs. 'Tisn't as if this Martin Burke was just a talker that made trouble with the men. We've had plenty of those, and we know how to deal with them. But this man, Martin Burke's a dirty ruffian"—Macpherson's "r's" began to roll—"a dirty spy, in the pay o' them that's your worst enemies. If I were you, I'd kick him out o' the camp on any excuse ye like to make to yourself."

"That's what we think," put in Price soothingly, "but we aren't sure, you know."

"Could any man with a cousin like Martin's be any good?" demanded Macpherson. "I wish ye'd settle this matter and settle the Burkes too, Price."

But the question was allowed to stand over, and Donald Price paid for that untimely toleration.

In three day's time the teams began to come into camp with the full barrels of water roped into the wagons behind them. One difficulty was overcome.

Macpherson's words could not be driven from Alan's mind. Unconsciously he began to watch Martin Burke—a great, stupid-looking man, with slow movements and sleepy brown eyes. He looked about as dangerous as an overgrown guinea-pig. But in a few weeks, in that swarming camp Alan had learned to judge men a little. And it seemed to him that there was both cruelty and treachery in those dull brown eyes, and a certain slyness in the lazy expression. But the liberal water supply had made further grumbling on that score impossible.

"I suppose they must drink a lot of water," said Alan to himself, eyeing a gang of Finns and Esthonians, "for they certainly don't wash in it."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHAKEN HILLS.

“WELL, have to get some timber from the ravine as well as water,” said Macpherson, malevolently regarding the lonely line of location-pegs in front. “These fellows on the preliminary survey used hard-wood. Don’t I pity ’em! I remember once I was on a survey, and we heard of a hard-wood country just ahead. I tell you, Hope, that we cleared the farms around of rail-fences and took ’em along rather than chop hardwood for pegs.”

Alan grinned sympathetically. He was too tired to talk much. The day was fading westward in a rose and amber glow. Across the intervening folds of the hills he could see little lights and puffs of steam. One of those wreaths of smoke came from the kitchen chimney, no doubt. His mind dwelt drowsily on the thought of supper. There had been a wild report earlier in the day that No. Five-Nought-Seven had been unloaded of a case of canned peaches, but no reliable evidence had yet been brought forward. Alan was not particularly interested in peaches. He thought of pork and pudding, hot and filling, and don’t bother looking for the plums.

They shouldered rod and level and turned towards camp. At the rail-head they found Five-Nought-Seven pushing off for home with two flat-cars in front of her

loaded with men. They ran and flung themselves into the locomotive's disreputable cab. The driver grinned at them through a black mask, and opened the throttle. Alan, who was constrained to sit on the floor, felt that he was bouncing about like a chip. He could scarcely hear Macpherson's voice in his ear.

Macpherson leaned out from the cab, blown by the roaring wind of their progress, and glanced back at the blurred rails. "I shall be glad to—see 'em—when they're worn bright with traffic," he roared at Alan; "think o' what it'll mean—opening up all that country. Great, I call it."

Alan opened his mouth and the words were shaken out of it. "Great!" he agreed. "We've been getting on like—a—house afire—lately." Five-Nought-Seven hummed on a down-grade, and the wheels of the flat-cars groaned and clattered. Gusts of rough laughter and joking were blown back, and a gay Southern voice was singing "L'Addio a Napoli."

"Getting on—too easy," bellowed Macpherson.

Five-Nought-Seven whirled them into camp. On the outskirts, high above the track, was the powder-house. It was a small and inoffensive looking building, standing alone among the rocks. Alan never passed it without an uneasy thought of its contents. "It gives my imagination the shivers," he told his uncle. Only the week before, a workman on the blasting gang had dropped a fulminate-of-mercury cap at his own feet—. Alan always shuddered at the memory.

He glanced up at the shed as Five-Nought-Seven rocked past. A man was climbing the rocks behind it, showing for a moment clear against the sky-line and

then disappearing. The scene flashed away as Five-Nought-Seven swung into camp and slowed, but Alan had recognized Martin Burke in the climbing man.

He dropped off the footboard. "I saw Burke foolin' round the powder-house," he told Macpherson importantly, "and I'm going to see what he is up to. He—he didn't look just right; I'll be back soon."

Mac grunted incredulously. "A wild goose chase," he said, "and the goose that's chased isn't the only one in it. Think you're going to police the camp in your spare time, youngster? The vanity o' man in his green youth!"

But Alan had gone. Macpherson chuckled as he made for the bunk-house. "Price said it'd be a good sign when the boy began to forget himself in his interest for the work," he said. "Just like Hope to go charging off like that! Eh! he's a hot-head. But it's a big work, a big work." He looked back at the raw cuttings, the clustered shacks, the immense purplish-green breadths of the hills, the sky strung over with summer cloud. "I'm glad to have a hand in it," said Macpherson.

Meanwhile Alan was climbing the rough ground towards the powder-house. It was hidden from the camp by a high spur of rock running down to a deep cutting.

Alan kept this ridge between himself and the shed, and came out on the crest of the height, four hundred feet above, among great rounded boulders. In front of him the hillside sloped sharply to the cutting. Behind him it fell away more gradually. "It's just like an African kopje," thought Alan, peering about in the twilight. Then he dropped suddenly behind a boulder,

for he caught sight of a dim figure moving among the rocks.

"Martin Burke!" murmured Alan. He remembered the Indian Wars of his younger years, and laughed softly to himself. "It's ten years since I trailed anyone like this," he chuckled, "and I was always the Red Tracker. But I wonder what I've done it for," he finished, with a return to common sense.

Martin Burke was busy with a couple of poles and a rope. Alan could hear him grunting as he heaved and strained at something, but could see little. Then Burke walked some thirty feet down the slope behind Alan, apparently pulling a rope with him, stopped, and hauled more strongly.

There was a sharp crack among the rocks. And immediately Martin Burke leaped from his post and fairly hurled himself down the hillside, rolling, falling, crashing through the bushes. The crack was not repeated, but in its stead came a jarring, grinding sound that made Alan leap to his feet. One of the great boulders was rocking and sliding slowly from its place on the steep brink of the hill.

Some flash of Burke's dastardly intention struck Alan's brain. No human power could have stopped the great stone as it gathered impetus and roared down the hill to the cutting and the house in its path. With some confused horror of what would occur in the next few seconds, Alan took the only road to safety, and hurled himself bodily down the further side of the ridge after Martin Burke.

He rolled almost to the bottom, sick and shaken, with that horror beating with his pulses. There was no

clear thought in his mind, but he felt a vast relief that most of the men would be away in the bunk-houses, out of the radius of greatest danger and further protected by the great spur of rock and earth. He had no time to feel more.

For a vast pale fluff of flame soared up into the quiet air, and the roar of the explosion went beyond all endurance by human sense. The solid hill heaved and cracked beneath him. An iron hand clutched at his throat, and he knew he was dying for air. Then the rain of rock began, crashing far and wide. He was beaten and bruised by tiny fragments, and the great stones ploughed thunderingly into the earth beside him. Then the darkness and the air rushed back again. He felt himself moved by some incredible power—moved, drawn up the slope, sucked in with the rushing hurricane of air towards the point of the explosion. He fought with all his strength, and the terrible sucking pressure seemed to pass. There must have ensued a few moments of partial unconsciousness, for he remembered nothing more until he found himself against trees and sharp fragments of new-fallen stone. He stumbled against a trunk and fell there—fell into cold moss and sweet grass, and his shaken world trembled away from him into a deeper darkness. When he came to himself all the camp was thrilling and roaring with life. Lanterns and torches danced and flared along the ridges. He raised himself from the wet moss and shouted resoundingly.

The foremost lantern seemed to detach itself from the rest, and came reeling down the hill towards him. Another moment and Marpherson was upon him,

shaking him delightedly by the collar of his coat.

"Are ye safe, lad?" he cried. "Are ye safe?"

"Safe and sound," gasped Alan breathlessly. "Are there any others hurt?"

"None that we can find," said Macpherson hurriedly, "though half the shacks are shaken flat, and a couple o' dozen men stunned and bruised, and the horses rampagin' about the country. But d'ye ken how it happened?"

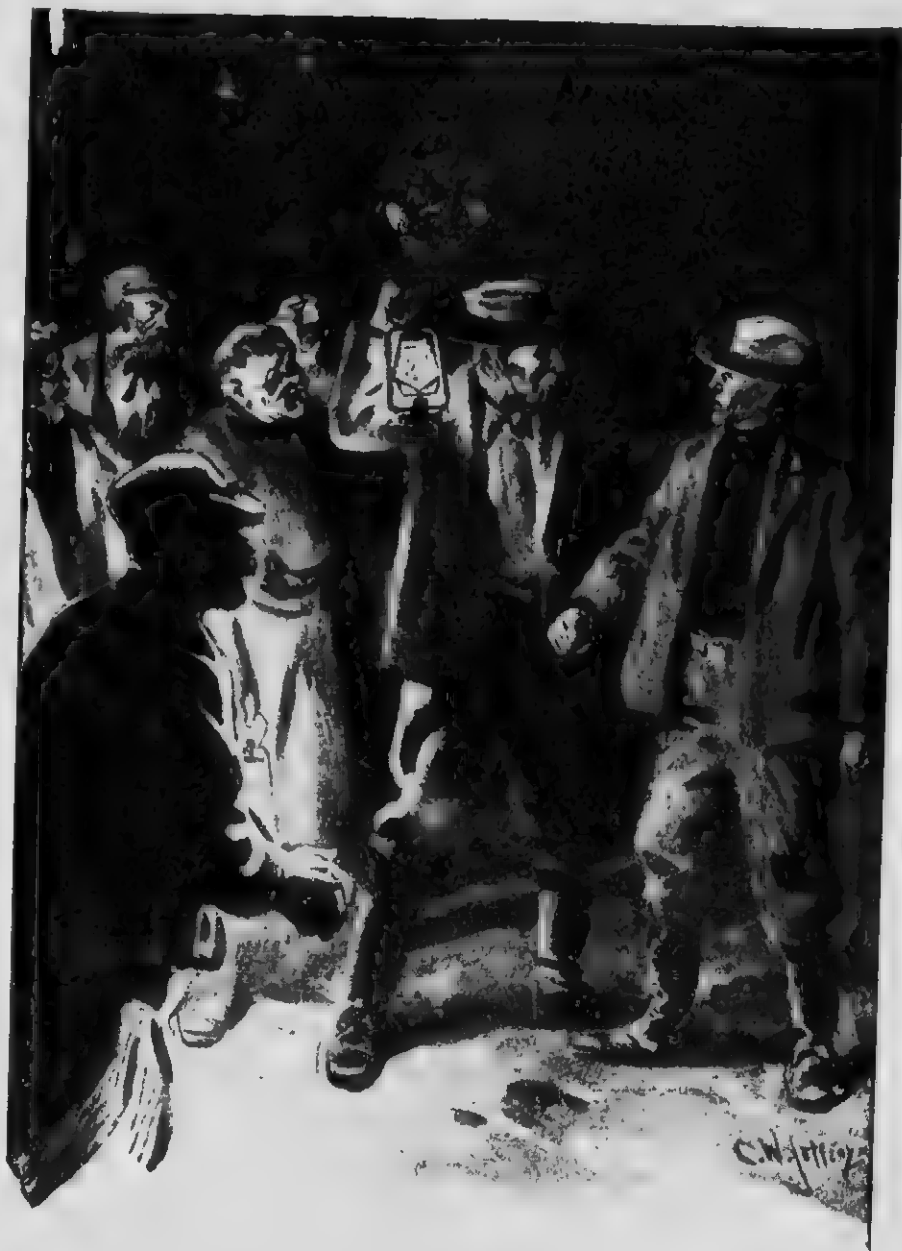
Alan glanced about him; he was encircled by a ring of lanterns now, and the light showed a score of kindly faces about him—faces of men whom he had grown to know and like; faces of men with, many of them, wives and children in the cities. A great anger rose in him against those vague, nameless enemies of the Road who would stoop to use the wiles of such tools as Martin Burke against such men as these.

"It was Martin Burke!" he cried recklessly. "He rolled a rock down on the powder-house. It was Martin Burke!"

There was a heavy silence, and Alan heard Macpherson catch his breath sharply. He knew by that sound he had made, in his inexperience, some mistake. He glanced anxiously at the older man. Ought he to have waited and told his uncle in private? But it was too late, now; he had blurted out the truth.

There was a sudden low murmur from the men about him. And suddenly one, the roughest of all, sprang back waving his torch. "It was Martin Burke!" he echoed in a great savage voice, "it was Martin Burke done it!"

In an instant all the other lanterns and torches



"ANOTHER MOMENT AND MACPHERSON WAS UPON HIM."

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gravitated towards the man who shouted. A score of fierce voices repeated the words. With a speed that was incredible, those words were sped from mouth to mouth, from end to end of the camp. The men, who had been straggling aimlessly, bunched together and took on a look of purpose, evil and threatening. Again Alan heard the low sound of an angry mob, and the words of their anger, tossed to and fro, were, "Martin Burke! Martin Burke!"

"What have I done?" cried Alan, clutching at Macpherson's arm. But Macpherson wrenched himself free, and ran for Donald Price. "Can't you hear 'em?" he called back. "It means lynching."

Alan followed him as well as he could in the darkness, with a wildly beating heart. Looking over the ridge, he saw that nearly every man in camp was rushing along the cutting; and from the crowd came that fierce droning murmur that meant death. They began to climb the hillside, shouting, waving fierce hands, dragging coils of rope. Alan shuddered, and doubled in his tracks, with some wild idea of holding them in check till his uncle came. As well might he have tried to stem a mountain torrent in flood. He was swept in with them as they poured over the crest, and drawn on with them irresistibly, like a straw in the current.

The man next to him was a young Italian, the same who had sung the plaintive "*L'Addio a Napoli*." He ran with his dark round head thrown back, his dark eyes fixed, his white teeth showing at every step, half drunken with that blind rage which is the anger of a mob. On his other hand ran a big Northman of some sort, whose face wore a look of pleasurable expectancy, and who

kept a sharp look-out for the man they sought. Of the two, Alan preferred the animal ferocity of the Italian to the Northman's intent air of business.

"They'll never find him in the dark," thought Alan. "and they'll wear themselves out before daylight."

Behind him a high voice was calling for Martin Burke, over and over again. "Where's the man?" cried the wild voice, "where's the man that would a' killed us all if we'd been by? Where's the man that would a' made our women widders? Bring him out, I say. Show him, just show him! O-O-O, Martin Burke, hoy, Martin Burke!" the voice ran on in grotesque calls and questions, and Alan shivered, and longed to break free of the crowd, but saw no chance.

As he plunged onward with them, borne away whether he would or no, his brain was utterly confused. He wondered where his uncle was, and what Macpherson was doing. He prayed that they might not fall in with Burke, for there was no doubting the temper of the men. And all the time he felt a certain fierce pleasure in touching so near to the heart of things, in being moved by larger fears and hopes than his smooth life had known. He had read of such things in books, such black deeds, such terrible, swift, lawless retribution. And now here he was, whirled onwards in the midst of all manner of wild events, the same Alan Hope, yet so different.

"Hoy, Martin Burke!" rang the shrill voice. "Come back and pay the price, Martin Burke! Sure you must have had a good price in your pocket to run such a risk. Now you pay us ours, Martin! No thanks to you we ain't all of us blown to dust. Come back and pay us our price, Martin Burke!"

Alan, the Northman, and the young Italian were running now on the outskirts of the crowd, when suddenly the Northman stumbled and turned. "Here's some poor soul here that's paid all debts," he cried. "Hey, boys, come back!"

A few of the men obeyed him, crowding round as he bent over a rock. "Hold a torch lower, here," he commanded, no longer a murderous spirit of revenge, but a foreman of parts. Then he drew back quickly, staring at the men. "It's Martin Burke," he said in a stifled voice. "He's dead." The others stared at him without a word, the anger fading palely from their faces.

The torches clustered closer, a little red ring of flame above the dead man. When the foreman rose, he held a little paper in his hand and stepped straight to Alan. "You're the boss' nevvv, ain't you?" he said in a grave, quiet way. "Well, I found this in his—in *that's* pocket," he jerked a thumb grimly towards the rock. "Nay," he went on, checking Alan with grave kindness, "it's no good your buttin' in. He's dead—killed by a rock shook down from the hill. Ay, he's paid his price. But this—this"—and he waved the paper excitedly—"Mr. Price must see this. You go take it to him."

Alan looked at the slip of paper thrust into his hand. It was a cheque on the Lamport Bank for a hundred dollars, and the signature made him forget everything else—forget his bruises and cuts, his aching weariness of mind and body, and even the man who had paid the price.

He turned almost before the words were out of the man's mouth and dashed off to find his uncle

CHAPTER V.

A RUMOUR.

AFTER the night of the explosion and the terrible death of Martin Burke, work went ahead smoothly for some weeks on the railroad. The unfortunate man had been moved by a clumsy and spiteful desire to do mischief; he had not the ability to plan and execute any more skilful scheme of destruction. So that the only result of the explosion was a brief delay in the rock-blasting operations, a temporary block in the big cutting, and the hole in the riven hillside above it.

That Martin Burke had been paid to do his mischief the cheque found on his body proved. Donald Price took it from Alan gravely, and put it in his pocketbook with a certain air of distaste. The next day he took it back with him to the city and showed it to his partner.

Meanwhile, Alan was packed into hospital. For in the fall down the hillside he had wrenched himself severely and injured a rib or so. "Nothing to signify," said the doctor light-heartedly, "but he'd better rest for a week or so."

So Alan rested his bruised bones in the little pine-scented hospital shanty, with its windows open to the broad hills and the skies and the wonderful healing winds. The great work in which he had a little part had begun to teach him self-effacement; those long days

in the hospital were to teach him patience. For his hurts were slow in healing.

"I feel like Mr. Venus' French gentleman in 'Our Mutual Friend,'" he wrote to his mother, "all ribs and nothing else. But the doctor says I will soon be all right. Macpherson spends all the time he can with me. He's a fine fellow; though I didn't like him at first. Expect that was more my fault than his, though. He's lots of fun. The least little thing is enough to set him off into one of his wild yarns, and he makes me laugh till I nearly cry with the ache in my precious ribs, he's so long and solemn all the time. The other evening a big meteor fell, and that was enough to set him off. He told me a long story about a man at an H. B. C. post somewhere near the Arctics, who got touched in his head. And he would run all over the place with a wire butterfly net, trying to catch meteors, so that he could keep them in little cages, like the children in the Indies keep fireflies. You never heard anything so ridiculous. He says he wants me back at work again, and I tell you I want to get back, too."

Perhaps the patient mother wondered at these letters, so cheery and plucky, when her boy had never been further from the home-care and the comforts he had loved, from the attention and consideration he had taken as his due. But Alan set his teeth and would not grumble. Macpherson drifted in daily to see him, and his uncle sent him hasty, affectionate messages from the city, and the doctor tried to cheer him up. Dr. Murchison was a young-old man, with a soft heart, a scathing tongue, and a bristle of mouse-coloured hair. He lent Alan all his travelling library. But this

consisted chiefly of entomological works, and German text-books dealing with little-explored nooks of the human skeleton ; which things, combining fearfully in Alan's dreams, caused him to return the volumes with thanks, and to fall back on thrice-read magazines, and long watchings of the high-piled clouds of summer, the splendid sunsets, and the ice-blink shaking its glittering green spears above the northern hills.

"You'll have a visitor to-morrow," the doctor told him one Saturday, "and there'll be a service in camp. Jim Blake's arrived on the scene."

"Who's he?" grunted Alan.

"The Rev. James Blake, an ordained missionary," replied Macpherson in his precise way. "He's the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Your uncle will be sorry to miss him—very sorry he'll be. Blake's one of the best fellows in the country, and he has a great way with the men. You'll hear half the camp roaring the old hymns."

"When can I get up?" demanded Alan, unheeding. Murchison ran his skilled fingers over the rebellious ribs, and grunted as Alan gasped.

"There's your answer," he gruffly replied; and departed with a box and a geological hammer to look for entomolites in the newly-blasted rock of a long cutting.

Alan stayed awake half that night watching a storm gathering far off above the hills, a thing of awe and beauty under the bright moon. He saw its turreted clouds march half round the heavens before he fell asleep. The morning came in level sheets of rain driving before a high wind; and with it came the

missionary, whom no weather could daunt, winning Alan instantly with his eyes and his handshake. He held service in the camp. And late in the afternoon he was gone again; a message had come from a dying man at a farm twenty miles away, and the Reverend James Blake took to the trail again; leaving the rough camp the brighter and better for his brief passage.

Macpherson drifted in to see Alan that night. "I tell you, Hope," said the lank man earnestly, "hat Blake's a fine fellow. He came all the way from Trois Fleurons, and now he's off to Lac de Pigeonneau with scarce two hours' rest. Price'll be sorry to have missed him. He's the real thing, is Blake. He preached on the 19th verse of the 43rd chapter of Isaiah—'Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert,' and he made every man who listened feel as if he were doing the Lord's work in building this road, and as if he were on his honour to do the best he could. I tell you he's the sort o' man that's wanted."

Macpherson nodded his head solemnly and drifted off again into the rain, leaving Alan quiet and thoughtful. His place was taken ten minutes later by Benny the cook, bearing a plate of cookies as an offering to Alan.

"There's only seven of 'em left," he said mournfully, "and one of em's bit. But I was bound you should have what there was. Bless you, how they missionary gents do feed! 'It's the fresh air and the hard work,' ses Mister Blake to me, 'I'll take some more, please.' Not that I grudge it to him, for a finer man never stepped, besides bein' a reg'lar post-bag for news. But them cookies,"

said Benny wistfully, "was my cheffy dove, as the French say. Yes," he repeated wistfully, "they was my cheffy dove."

"They're fine," said Alan, stifling a laugh. "Tell us some o' the news, Ben."

"Well," said Benny, rolling his eyes, "there's plenty of it in my mind, but I can't make it sound much in words. But that survey started by them people you knows of to do us up"—he became vastly mysterious—"is goin' on straight over *and* through everythin'. Took the line straight through a farmer's barn, they did, in at one door and out at t'other. They don't stop for nothin'. Bless you, it's all a big bluff. I've seen a many. None the less, though, we does right to watch out and hustle. They'd make their bluff fact quick as winkin'." He rolled his eyes and breathed heavily, oppressed with the knowledge of such treacherous deeds. "Oh, and Mister Blake, he's just from Trois Fleurons," he continued, "and he ses as the whole limit's as good as sold to Norton and Kemp. And you may bet that old thief 'Baggy' Kemp has a fist in these affairs, and a dirty fist at that," finished the cook heatedly.

When Benny had gone, Alan lay wrinkling his forehead in sudden and troubled thought. Where had he heard something about the big timber limit at Trois Fleurons before? Why did he vaguely feel that there was something wrong in the news? Why did he feel worried? 'The whole limit's as good as sold to Norton and Kemp.' Trois Fleurons, Trois Fleurons, Timber—, Ties—. Oh, he knew; he remembered. It was in his uncle's office that first day—how long ago it seemed!

He remembered little Mr. Merrick's great booming voice; he had spoken of *Trois Fleurons*. What was it he had said? Alan lay and frowned at a half-eaten cooky, his eyes set in an effort of Memory. Slowly the scene and the words came back to him. "Muir and Carlyle agree to our terms about the ties," Merrick had said; "they'll send 'em on to us from the limit above *Trois Fleurons*. Their offer's all right, eh?" And his uncle's answer—"Close with it, and keep them to it." So something was wrong perhaps. Or why that rumour about Norton and Kemp. Perhaps the rumour was a false one. Perhaps a hundred things. Alan lay and thought till his head buzzed, but, with his incomplete knowledge, he could arrive at no conclusion. Perhaps everything was all right. Perhaps something was all wrong. The whole situation was dominated by that "Perhaps." He thought some more, and his head ached with the anxiety of the effort. The only thing that seemed clear was that his uncle ought to hear of that rumour.

Donald Price ought to have been on hand; but he was doing three men's work as it was. His subordinate and representative on the job, who scarcely enters into this story at all, was one MacAllister; one of those men with whom the ablest become at times entangled and deceived; useful enough as a subordinate, but incapable of sudden decision. Alan put him out of his thoughts.

Donald Price must know. Donald Price was away in the city, fighting the enemies of the road in a stolen fortnight; it was something about a consignment of rails that had threatened delay. And he trusted

MacAllister's honesty and capability. Alan, less absorbed, less gifted, less intent, trusted the first but not the last in MacAllister. No, it was no use telling him. His uncle must know. But how?

The rumour was but a rumour. It might be false. But Alan could not lull himself into any feeling of security. And if it should be true—Alan lay still, thinking, thinking. And the winds swooped down upon the shanties as if they would tear them from the hold of the hills.

Alan's thoughts ended in this, "Uncle Don must know. And it's for me to let him know."

There was a train for the city that stopped at Landport early in the morning; and there was a telegraph station at Westaway. He could decide those questions later. The main thing now was to get to Landport. Alan listened to the roaring wind; watched the flying moonlight darkened by gusts of rain. "I guess Lucy Gray can get me there," he thought gravely. "I can't ask any of the other fellows to do it, because I've so little to go upon. It's such a vague report. . . . But I can never rest unless I let uncle know."

He had almost forgotten his ribs. He remembered them sharply as he struggled into his clothes. "If Murchison comes in, it's all up," he gasped, keeping a bright look-out. He knew that Murchison would knock him down with a pillow and tie him into the cot sooner than allow such an infringement of his lawful authority. He knew, too, that he could never make the shock-headed little man understand the urgency of the case. And Macpherson, who would have believed him without requiring reasons, was off and away somewhere out on

the rainy hills, tramping about in the darkness and meditating on Blake's sermon. "Why couldn't he be here when he was wanted, I wonder?" groaned Alan, toiling painfully into his rubber boots. His face was pinched with pain as he slipped out into the wild night. The great shouting wind seemed to stretch out its friendly arms to him. The moon seemed to swim wildly down the skies. He had been many days in hospital, and his spirits rose as the keen gusts of rain stung against his cheek. He felt that this riotous night of clouds and wind was not hostile to him and his purpose.

A wondering Swede harnessed Lucy Gray at Alan's bidding. He stared at the white-faced lad and the tempestuous weather. But neither could speak six words of the other's language; so the Swede's warnings and Alan's necessity were alike unexpressed.

Lucy Gray had been four days in her stable. She sniffed the wild airs, whickered with pleasure, and bit Alan's elbow in sisterly affection. Her glittering heels were restless. She stretched her sinewy neck towards the hills, and strained against the harness. Alan had a moment's misgiving that the clattering buckboard would be as a feather whirled in the track of Lucy Gray that night. He remonstrated with her after the fashion caught from his uncle. "Do remember, Lucy," he pleaded, "that you're not out for fun. Don't go cutting up any of your monkeyshines to-night. I tell you, Lucy, it's serious."

He took the reins and climbed into the buckboard; sharp stabs of pain in his bruised sides almost robbed him of breath. The whip he left in its socket; Donald

Price had touched Lucy with it once in the early days of their friendship; and she had stopped where she was and kicked the buckboard into matchwood. It had been stuck together again, and Lucy's prejudices were respected.

Alan glanced up at the driving sky; the clouds were growing thinner, and the moon was showing more frequently. Down in the west where the wind was born the sky was almost clear, of a dim green colour; touched with a few great blots of scud, cored with gray and fringed with foaming silver.

Alan slapped the reins on the mare's back. "Get up," he said, "get up, Lucy." Immediately he was swept forward; the camp dropped away behind as Lucy Gray faced the trail. Alan bent forward, dizzy with pain, doubtful whether the wind or the mare was thus sweeping him on and away, into the wild night.

CHAPTER VI.

A WILD DRIVE.

FOR a little while, Alan was confused and bewildered with the pain of moving and the riot and roar of the night. He sat bent forward in the seat, his lip caught between his teeth, the reins held firmly. But from the beginning Lucy took her own way; and presently she also took the bit between her teeth and lengthened her long stride. Alan had driven a little in the city; but until the last few weeks he knew no more of horses than the average city-bred lad. He had not the understanding, the control, he could not send his impelling will over the reins as his uncle could. He held tight and prayed that Lucy might not become skittish.

After the sharpest pain had passed, Alan glanced back at the camp. It lay clear for a moment in a fleeting patch of moonlight, the clustered shacks and old coaches clear-cut in velvet blackness upon the glimmering surface of the land. Then again the shadows took it as they swept over the hills, and only the spangling lights sent their bright beams after Alan. Presently even these were hidden, and Alan knew the camp was already a mile behind.

"Steady, Lucy," said he, "steady, old girl." The mare thrust out her bony jaw, tossed her wild mane, and

her eye glinted whitely back at him. She was taking her own way—the only way she knew, the road to Landport. Alan could not make out the rough track as it lifted and fell upon the rugged edge of the plain. But Lucy's fierce eyes picked the trail without error, her big hoofs bore her up lightly as a leaf in her unbroken stride, and where she went, the buckboard must needs follow until the traces broke. That was her idea of being driven.

She took the ridge at the edge of the plateau so sharply that Alan was nearly tilted over the wheel; and whirled out upon the level. The plain was a wonderful sight. It seemed to Alan that they were dashing into a swirling confusion of earth and cloud, of light and shadow, of which the land was as unstable as the air. The clouds swept ceaselessly across the pale sky, their shadows falling darkly across the glimmering earth; behind them the wind sang like a mighty harp-string, and the moon seemed to plunge ceaselessly down to the never-reached horizon.

The buckboard leaped and jolted among the rocks, and at every jolt, twinges of torment shot through Alan's sides. He would not regard them. He had always had courage enough; but endurance had been unknown to him. Now, uplifted by an impersonal anxiety, an unselfish interest, he almost forgot himself and his sufferings; which were at times sickeningly keen, though coming from no very serious cause.

The mare's dilated eyes were undeceived by the fleeting cloud-shadows, more dangerous than any darkness, that fled beneath her thundering hoofs. At one steady speed she laid the miles behind her.

The dim world reeled past. The noise of her haste was swept away in the roaring wind; and sometimes to Alan the sense of motion ceased, and it seemed that the whole universe was sliding away with the cloud-shadows, and that he and the mare were moving at the clogged crawl of dreams. The words of his errand wove themselves into a sort of fitful cadence in his brain. "The whole limit—as good as sold—to Norton and Kemp. The whole limit—above Trois Fleurons—sold to Norton and Kemp. Shall I go on—to the city—or telegraph from Westaway—or telegraph from Westaway?"

The roar of the wind was so incessant that his ears no longer heeded it. When for a moment it sank, the noise of Lucy's thunderous pace seemed to spring out at him as from silence. The clouds were torn further apart, their ragged silver fringes bannered out like trails of steam, and the high moon painted the land in light, robbing it of all colour, so that to Alan it was a blurred vision of black and silver. But it no longer impressed him with its loneliness, utter as that was. The hills, the woods, the barren levels—all wore for him the faces of friends, showing him their beauty, their peace, their massive indifference. And still the mare whirled him on in the grasp of the rioting winds. He sat motionless and silent, half hypnotized by the beat of air, the endless flying rack of cloud in the sky and shadow on the ground.

Where the rough trail began to sink towards the burnt grounds and the young forest, Lucy slackened speed at the spot where Donald Price was wont to rest her. Alan became conscious that he was aching

agonizingly in every muscle, that he was already weary. The wind, which had seemed so friendly and invigorating, began to trouble him. He would have given anything to escape it for a little while.

When Lucy felt rested, she went on again of her own accord, but more slowly. Alan dozed as he sat, and awakened with a thrill of thankfulness that he had not fallen, to find himself enclosed in slender young trees. It was as if they had sprung up from the plain in their thousands and encircled the buckboard with a glitter of polar and aspen leaves, a whipping of slender boughs, a ceaseless rustle and hum as the wind rushed through them. The night seemed strange and dreamlike to Alan. Strange and dreamlike it remained ever after in his memory.

It was at a dark turn of the trail, where the shadow was the blacker for the tossing foam of aspen leaves, bright as glass beneath the moon, that a man sprang suddenly and silently from the trees. Like a wild beast he sprang, breathing hard and clutching at the reins, with a gleam of some weapon in his hand. He shouted some drunken words which the wind bore away. Alan snatched at the whip, his only defence, and the man snatched at the mare's head. But she was too quick for him. Her long neck shot sideways with a curious snake-like movement, her yellow teeth closed on the man's shoulder, and for a second she dragged and shook him viciously. Alan had an instant's vision of his brutal distorted face, heard for an instant his hoarse cries. Then Lucy flung him down and leaped forward above him. The buckboard wheels rose sickeningly, and found the earth again. Alan put his weight upon

the reins; but the bit was between those fierce teeth again; and when she was angry or frightened, Lucy Gray stopped for no voice but her master's.

"Lucy, Lucy!" cried Alan, conscious that he was suddenly shaking. "Lucy, you may have killed him! For Heaven's sake, stop and let me go back!" But the mare tore along the narrow trail, all afire in her rage. "Lucy!" cried Alan, "he looked like one of our own Finns!" But Lucy was in no mood to take soothing from any but Donald Price, and Donald Price was far away. Alan's shaken nerves steadied again, and he realized that her fright and rage must wear themselves out. But the shock of the incident remained on his brain. It was inexplicable. And if it had not been for the mare, it might have fared badly with him. He was haunted with a fear that a dead man lay among the tossing silver mist of leaves that hid the trail—lay as Lucy had flung him down in her anger. "And I'm sure he was one of our Finns," repeated Alan, shivering a little, "I'm sure he was one of our Finns. What did he say? What did he want? Steady, Lucy, Steady!"

The mare flung her high head higher and ramped along the narrow ribbon of trail. She went at top speed for two or three miles, and then of a sudden grew quieter. Alan managed to regain a little control over her. "Steady, now," he said soothingly, "steady, old girl. There, it's all right, and you're quite safe. So am I, for a wonder," he finished thoughtfully.

After that they progressed steadily enough. The pain in Alan's wrenched muscles grew sharper with every breath he drew; he would have given worlds to rest under the trees for an hour. "But we mustn't

miss that train," he said aloud, watching Lucy's long ears twitch, "we mustn't miss that train. Uncle Don has to know of that report. 'The whole limit above Trois Fleurons as good as sold to Norton and Kemp.' And about this man, too. I'm sure he was one of ours, Lucy. Oh, how I wish we were at Landport!"

Another dream-like hour passed. To Alan it seemed as if he were driving for ever through that interminable forest of young trees, lifting their swaying walls on either side of the trail. At last he noticed that the moon, dipping low to the hills, had lost some of her silver radiance of light. A bird whirled blindly before the wind from thicket to thicket. Looking over his shoulder he saw the first pale flood of the dawn drowning the lesser stars. Another dreaming hour, in which the world dreamed with him and the wind died, and Landport came in sight.

The air was growing warm and golden. Alan pulled out his watch; it was not long after four o'clock. The train would stop for a few minutes at Landport to take on freight. He was in plenty of time. "Get up, Lucy," he said, "you'll want your breakfast."

He drove steadily over the last outskirts of the hills, and through the dusty streets to the livery stable. Here he roused a drowsy man from some work in the straw and gave the mare into his charge. Lucy went without demur, for the place and the man were alike familiar to her. But the man bestowed a stare on Alan; Alan did not know that his face was as white as paper and his eyes abnormally large from anxiety and pain. He went off to the station, stumbling a little now and then.

"That young feller do look bad, for sure," said the

man of the livery stable, gazing after him as he deftly unharnessed Lucy Gray. Alan was conscious that he felt "bad." The pain seemed to grow worse and worse; at every step, at every breath, it cut through him like a knife. He stood on the edge of the little lonely platform and stared at the gleaming ribbons of the rails, winding away into an apparently infinite distance. He hoped the train would not be long.

Far off a black blot grew upon the distance and the golden glimmer of young day. Soon the rails were thrumming like silver threads before the swift advance of the engine. Alan saw it slowing for the station, —slowing—slowing—no more. Of a sudden he realized that it was not going to stop! His heart sank in dismay. But in a moment he made his decision. There was one passenger coach in front of the flat-cars. As the engine thundered past he leaped for the hand-rail and the steps of that coach. He was used to hopping on and off construction trains going at precarious speeds, and he leapt to safety. But the shock half-stunned him. He fell full-length on the platform, heard something in his side snap like a dry twig, was overwhelmed with sharp agony. He lay heavily, conscious that some one was hauling him by the collar, but powerless for a time to move.

A rough voice in his ears brought him to himself. The mist cleared from his sight, and he saw the conductor and a brakeman bending over him, both very red and angry. "Open your mouth, fool!" said the conductor indignantly. And Alan was half-drowned with a deluge of water, strongly flavoured with oil. The brakeman had stuck the end of a funnel in his

mouth and was sluicing water down it from a tin can, with a stern and earnest countenance. Alan coughed, kicked, and tried to sit up, scarcely suppressing a cry as he did so, the pain was so sharp.

"Serves you right," said the conductor severely, "if you have bust a bone. P'raps you'll explain why you done it?"

"I had to," gasped Alan. "You're MacKittrick, aren't you? Well, something's gone wrong—over on the work—that I had to let my uncle know about. My uncle's Mr. Price of Merrick & Price. This train was my only chance. I——"

"Don't you say another word," broke in the conductor with a changed face. "The name o' Donald Price is enough. We all know him. Don't we, Bill? You stay still, young feller. You're too shook up for explanations. Mr. Price in the city, eh? Must'a gone in on the 703. Didn't go in with me. Have some more water? Hi, Bill, fetch it in a glass." They made him comfortable in the stuffy old coach and withdrew. Alan lay back on the fusty cushions and dozed, weakened more than he guessed. The events of the night seemed hazy and unreal as in a dream. But an active anxiety was busy in his brain, an active pain in his body. In that violent fall he had broken one of his damaged ribs. It felt like a gritting, red-hot bar; but still he would not complain. "I must finish this up in style," he thought, with the obstinacy of youth. He would not admit when he was beaten.

But broken bones regard no such intentions. Before they reached Westaway, Alan was in a high fever. And at Westaway brakeman Bill went in search of a doctor.

Old Dr. Anderson looked at Alan, listened to the conductor's explanation ; and thereupon took the lad to his own house and put him to bed in the spare room looking out on the fruit trees in the yard—a place of such comfort and peace as Alan had not known since he left home. Here he lay, in the grip of such pain and sickness as had never touched him before in all his strong young life. And this telegram was despatched to Donald Price by MacKittrick.

"Your Nevew here with Dr. Anderson hurt jumpin' on Train not serious ses telegraft you report limit Trois Fleurons sold Norton and Kemp watch out Answer."

To which Price answered with the one word, "Coming."

CHAPTER VII.

GATHERING STORMS.

FOR some days Alan lay away from the pleasant, fighting, working world, in a place of pain and fever, of dim troubles and dark dreams. For some time he saw the days and nights of weariness as white or black blurs, across which moved old Doctor Anderson, his grey-haired housekeeper, and sometimes his uncle. He heard himself talking a great deal, and vaguely wondered why. "Is the limit sold?" he kept crying. "Is it sold? How shall we get our ties if Muir and Carlyle have fooled us?" Again and again they assured him that it was all right; that, thanks to him, the information had reached the firm in time. "Old Norton is one of those we have against us," Donald Price explained slowly and distinctly, "and he's the worst one. He bribed Muir and Carlyle, I expect, to repudiate their agreement with us. They knew we hadn't money enough to fight 'em; Lord help the poor man or the poor firm that seeks justice against millionaires. But we learned of it in time, Alan. We've held them to the last tittle of the agreement. It's all right, lad. We're sure of our ties now."

And Alan would listen eagerly, with bright eyes, and be quieted for a moment. And then forget all about it, and begin his questioning again. Or sometimes he

would talk by the hour about the unknown man who had leaped out at him from the trees. "Lucy, Lucy," he would cry, "you've killed him! I'm sure he's lying there under those bright leaves, crushed into the earth just as you threw him down. I'm sure he's dead. And he looked like one of our Finns, too. The wheels went over him. Stop, Lucy, stop!". Or again it was the wind, which he said, would not let him lie quiet for a minute. "It's blowing me away," he kept repeating, "blowing me away into the darkness. The earth is sliding away, and the sky is sliding away, and I'm going with them. And I can't remember what it was I had to tell uncle about Trois Fleurons. Lucy, I'm sure that man's dead, dead under those trees. The wind won't blow him away."

In vain they assured him that every yard of the trail where it ran through the forest had been examined, and that no dead man was to be found. Price put it all down to fever; until he learned from one of his gang-foremen that a man was missing, a Finn. "The boy's right," he said, puzzled, "but I don't understand it. I thought it was all delirium, but it seems it is not. The youngster's pretty bad, isn't he, Doctor?"

"Aye," said old Dr. Anderson, "he is. But he's young and he's lived clean. A plucky fellow, Price, as your nephew should be." He knew Donald Price of old, and chuckled as the big, tired man flushed under the compliment. "That drive must have hurt him a good bit," he went on, "and after he finally smashed that rib——" He shrugged his shoulders eloquently. "And yet Mr. MacKittrick told me that there was never a word o' complaint out o' him. He's fine stuff."

"He's altered a good deal," said Price thoughtfully. He gripped the Doctor's hand hard. "I'll not forget your kindness," he said. "And—pull the lad through, won't you? For his mother's sake."

"And yours," said Anderson cheerily, "if not for his own. Why, man, o' course I'll pull him through." But he looked grave when he went back to Alan. "It was the keeping up so long after the mischief was done," he muttered. "The lad's got grit to have done it. But he's pretty bad—worse than I let Price know. It's easy to see that the boy's got to be the very light of his eyes, Eh! That's the way with us old bachelors; we're always breaking the tenth commandment over other people's children. A fine lad, a fine lad."

Donald Price went back to the work, a heavy weight on his lonely heart. Alan had grown very dear to him; and to others also. Macpherson went about like a saturnine ghost, and the cook lamented openly. "Never was there nobody," Ben complained, "what liked my cookies as he done."

Alan fought through the long days of sickness and fever, most tenderly cared for. And at last there dawned a day when he came to himself and the pain was eased. He was himself; but tired and weak, content to sleep, content to lie still and watch the green leaves and the waving curtains; the sunlight moving on the walls and the gentle hands of the old housekeeper busy with her knitting. Everything seemed a dream but the present hour and its languid peace. Even that Road, which was teaching him to toil and suffer, even that great work which was touching his responsive soul to finer issues—even that seemed one with the dream,

Then the hard, clean life, the work in the open air, the sound sleeps in the shadow of the hills—these began to tell. Doctor Anderson's face lost its gravity. The housekeeper began to turn her thoughts to delicate creations in cookery. Alan's curiosity awoke with his appetite ; he longed to know everything that had happened during his illness. That Road, struggling forward over the hills, became once more in his mind a conscious power to toil and fight for ; once more it dominated him. Now, those still days of peace and weakness were the dream ; the Road the wonderful reality.

"Please, when may I get up?" moaned Alan, wriggling inside his bandages. "Please, when is it dinner time?"

"Whist, laddie," reproved the old housekeeper. "Ye had your breakfast but an hour ago, and ye'll get no more till eleven o'clock. As to getting up, I wonder at the boldness you have. Ask the Doctor, and see what his answer is. Eh! Get up, indeed!"

"You're very good to me," said Alan with penitence. "I can't be grateful enough to you and the Doctor. I think it was the finest thing, to find me sick on the train and take me home with him. It's like the Good Samaritan. And I've been such a nuisance, too, I can't think why he did it.

"He knew your uncle, Mister Price," was the simple answer, "and glad enough we are to do anything for him. Not but that the Doctor would turn away from a sick sparrow," she finished proudly, "if he could give the wee creature help."

"He's helped this wee creature," said Alan grinning,

"and he's very grateful, Mrs. Murray, to both of you."

"Whist, now," said the old lady, and something bright fell on the pillow she was smoothing, "my own laddie would have been as tall as you if he'd lived." Alan was touched and silent, wondering that he should receive so much kindness.

"Get up?" roared the Doctor. "No, indeed, you'll not get up for a full week, my lad, and be thankful if you do then. There's nothing like health to thank the Lord for, let me tell you; and you're a fine healthy fathom of a youngster, or that week might be three. But bones are bones, and don't meddle with 'em."

As Alan grew stronger, he saw no more of his uncle. Donald Price was back at the work; finding much to do, the Doctor told him. There were rumours of more trouble with the men, who were out of hand after MacAllister's reign. "Something about a man called Burke," said Dr. Anderson. "I heard that the men go sneaking off in tens and twenties for drinking-bouts at his farm. It means a big row, I'm afraid." Every such report sent Alan half-wild with anxiety to get back to the scene of toil and warfare that held his heart. He was hungry even for the dull hours of peg-setting with Macpherson; hungry for the tingle in the blood, the sense of conflict in the air; hungry for the clamorous camp; hungry for the hills; hungry for the Road. When the days of his release came, and he rejoined the servants of the Road, he felt that once more he had regained the fulness of his life.

In his absence the construction camp had been moved. The steady advance of the steel was leaving

the dry, rocky plateau behind. They were once more approaching wooded country intersected with ravines, and the character of the work changed.

Alan was quick to notice the sense of trouble in the very air he breathed. There was a sullen and lawless spirit abroad among the rougher workmen. The Finns were discontented; the Italians, quiet enough so far, did nothing to reassure those who knew their inflammable nature. Donald Price went about with his weary eyes alert, his square jaw set more squarely under his sun-bleached beard. Macpherson even was uneasy. They gave Alan the warmest of welcomes. "It's good to see you again, Hope," said Macpherson, "and if I don't mistake, you'll be just in time for a fine old shindy. You've heard something about the last trouble—about their going off on the drink at Burke's farm? Well, we expect to catch 'em in the act any day now. They have grown reckless under MacAllister. Your uncle, Hope, has just the worst fault of men of his temperament—he trusts too far. That's as dangerous as trusting too little. I never had any use for MacAllister. Ye understand, lad, and he's no grip on a seetuation."

Alan thrilled in every nerve, ready for any conflict. "I never thought," he said, "that I should be so glad to see a grade-peg again. What a lot's been done while I was ill," he finished jealously.

"There'll be plenty o' pies for you to stick your fingers into yet," Macpherson assured him dryly. "There are some folks who never know when they are well off. Now, I'm a man o' peace, and these shindies make me tired." Alan laughed joyously. Macpherson,

to whom dangers and difficulties seemed to come as naturally as dinners to most men—good old Mac! How glad he was to see them all again.

"Thank God you're all right," Price had said, a hand on each shoulder, shaking him gently backwards and forwards. "Thank God you are with us again, Alan." Alan thanked God every time he faced a new day, every time he welcomed a new night. He slept dreamlessly, gathering strength with every hour. From such a sleep Macpherson roused him one day on the earliest brink of a gray dawn. "Get up, I hope," he said quickly, "it's come."

"What?" cried Alan, diving into his boots.

"The information we've been waiting for," answered the other. "Thirty men left last evening for Burke's farm."

"What's uncle going to do? What does he want us for? Where are we going?" demanded Alan breathlessly, wide-eyed in the gray light.

"We're going after them," said Macpherson gruffly, "and we're going to bring 'em back with us. At least, so I understood your uncle to say. Ye'll understand I'm no so confident myself." He pulled a revolver out of his box and stood waiting, a gaunt figure in the twilight, twirling it round his finger till Alan was ready. Alan's eyes grew wider at the sight.

"Does uncle know?" he began, staring at the six-shooter. But Macpherson, whose temper was always bad when he was worried, snapped him short. "It's your uncle's orders," he remarked, "and if I were you I wouldn't waste my time asking fool questions. You'll learn soon enough. Come on, if you're ready."

Alan followed him in a shiver of excitement. Outside

he was amazed to find a little army of men drawn up—fifty at least. His uncle was giving directions in a low stern voice that he scarcely recognised. "Five-Nought-Seven will take us down the line until we're as nearly on a level with the farm as we can get," said Price, "and then we strike across country for ten miles. And remember, men, I shall deal heavy punishment to whoever commences hostilities. Your weapons are for defence. Are you all ready?"

There was a murmur of assent which sounded joyful. Alan looked along the ranks. They were all men he knew—Macpherson, MacAllister, three or four others, Benny the cook with a bandanna handkerchief tied round his head after the fashion of a brigand, steady foremen, skilled workmen, Canadians, English, Scots, and here and there a stolid Swede. Yet every other face bore a grin of unqualified pleasure.

"I'll look after you," whispered Benny as they loaded themselves on to the flat cars; "twenty-two of em's Finns. They'll use their fists or their feet. The rest's I-tallyuns. They'll use knives. We wanter watch out for them." Alan caught his breath quickly, a-thrill with wild excitement.

"Is your rib hurtin' of you?" asked Benny anxiously. "Perhaps you didn't oughter come. I knew of a man oncet what broke a rib and it stuck inter him and inter him, through his lungs, till it came out on t'other side. Yes," said Benny, "it skewered him like a chicken," he repeated with relish.

Some one behind them snorted with ill-repressed laughter. Alan turned and saw Doctor Murchison's twinkling eyes beneath an enormous sombrero. "You

here?" he asked, astonished at the little man's warlike aspect. "Yes," said Murchison complacently, "I may be needed, you know. I come as non-combatant—strictly as a non-combatant, of course. I have brought a case of such instruments as I am most likely to need, and some lint. D'you mind not sitting on it? Thanks. But Price doesn't know I'm here," he finished anxiously, glancing about and pulling the sombrero over his eyes.

"You'd better have a wrench or a crowbar," said someone in a hoarse whisper.

"No, thanks," returned Murchison placidly, "I'm much obliged to you, but there are worse weapons of defence and offence than a pair of surgical scissors."

His companions subsided, feeling vaguely chilled. With a hiss of steam and a grinding of wheels, Five-Nought-Seven swooped off down the line. Eastward a pale line of amber showed under the skirts of the clouds, and in the rift a star or two still lingered. From the men still rose that hum of pleasure.

The driver opened the throttle, and Five-Nought-Seven roared round the curves, the cars clattering and banging in her wake. Alan dropped his head on his arms, and wondered what the next few hours might bring about.

"Sure you don't feel that rib a-ticklin' your lungses?" roared Benny. "It's real bad when they get jinted in the middle. They goes pokin' around an' wagglin' all over. There was a man I knew oncet—" The rest of his speech was blown away, but Alan heard the word "chicken." Five-Nought-Seven thundered down the track. And eastward the day awoke in rose and lilac and gold, glories in beauty and peace.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT BURKE'S FARM.

IN time Five-Nought-Seven slowed and stopped, and the men dropped silently to the ground, forming up behind Price in rough military array. "If we had but a band," whispered the irrepressible Macpherson, "we'd go ahead in fine style to 'See the Conquering Hero comes, Beat the trumpets, Blow the drums'—no, it's the other way round, but it's all the same."

Alan giggled, and Macpherson regarded him gravely. "Let me tell you," said he, "that this is no laughing matter. I've known men killed in these rows. There's nothing to snigger at because one o' your elders got mixed in his quotations."

"You'll wait here till we get back," said Price to the grimy engine driver. And then they tramped away through the young morning. On either hand birds were brushing the dew from the grass, and the winds were sweet with the full breath of summer. This errand seemed sharply at odds with the day.

"I hate this police work," snarled Macpherson, tripping into a rabbit-hole after an hour's hard walking. The sun was growing hot, and Dr. Murchison's face was scarlet under the sombrero as he straggled at the tail of the procession clutching his instrument case—"like a skeleton at a feast"—as someone said.

They crawled through the barbed wire that marked

the limit of Burke's farm, and tramped on again. "Farm," snorted Macpherson, "he calls this a farm! I've seen a mission Indian make a better farm with a pair of garden shears!"

Before long the farm-buildings came in sight, unkept barns and slovenly house sheltered by a few poplars. They approached cautiously; Price and Macpherson went ahead and rapped at the house door. There was no answer, and they opened it, the others crowding closely at their heels with arms ready.

Inside, the reek of poisonous spirits was stifling. Alan could hardly breathe the foul air. Smoking oil lamps shone thickly in the daylight. Alan's lips tightened and grew pale in sheer disgust, physical and moral. He was too young to realise fully the pity of the sight as well. He only felt a dim shame for these his fellow men.

The missing men lay about the floor for the most part as they had fallen when overcome by the stuff Burke had sold them. One or two Finns were propped against the wall, trying to sing. An Italian sat with his head on the table, his comely dark face turned into the likeness of something lower than any brute, his hands blindly groping for a bottle which they could not have held. Only Burke had his senses. His bloodshot eyes rolled slowly to the door, his big form rose slowly to its feet as he saw Donald Price. There was a certain power in his aspect which, in a good man, would have commanded respect. Even in one as bad as he, it was strong enough to be recognised, even by the good. "Well," said he, with a faint grin that showed teeth as white as a wolf.

"I've come for my men," said Price grimly, his anger in his eyes. But the bloodshot ones met his steadily. Burke's grin grew wider as he glanced with a certain scorn at the helpless figures on the floor.

"Take them," said he, with steady insolence, "take them if you can. I've done with them for the time."

"For all time," answered Price as steadily, "this will not happen again, Burke."

"Ye can't jail me for givin'—for givin', mind ye—for givin' my friends a drink," said Burke, his eyes beginning to dance with a light of battle.

"No," said Price simply, "but there are other ways. I shall take one of them." He turned carelessly from the man, and called the others in. "Drag them out," he said shortly, pointing to the figures on the floor, "and put them under the pump. We must bring them round a little, if we can."

The sober men, somewhat disappointed that things had gone so peacefully, fell upon the drunken ones, and proceeded to revive them as far as possible in the open air. Only three or four had strength enough to show fight. Alan and Macpherson stayed with Price, they scarcely knew why.

Price went to the door and stood staring out into the distance where the heat-haze quivered fitfully, sick at heart, wearied in body. Burke remained within the reeking room, indifferent. Alan went outside; he could endure the stifling air no longer; the signs of the night-long carousal sickened him; he felt as if he must again get into touch with the sun and the good earth and the clean, sweet air.

Donald Price stood still in the doorway. Murchison

lounge behind him, his keen dark eyes glancing from side to side. Burke was within the room, nothing about him more insolent than his indifference. The young Italian, maddened with vile liquors, broke free from the men who were pouring water over him, and turned on them with a knife. Alan saw the long, vicious blade gleam in the brown hand. A Swedish foreman swung a fist like a sledge-hammer and knocked the youngster down as the easiest way out of the difficulty. The sound of the blow came to Alan's ears and sickened him. The Italian lay where he fell, a red streak creeping under his curls. The men poured some more water over him, unmoved; Alan felt that he, too, hated this police-work. Doctor Murchison trotted up to the group with a long bandage in one hand and a little bottle in the other. Something in his appearance drew a smile from Alan; and the intolerant disgust of youth turned to something nearer pity. These men, foreign-born, untaught, rough, ignorant, were in no case to resist temptation. The thought made his anger against Burke all the stronger. A man came lounging from the barn, a can in his hand and one arm in a sling. He mingled with the business-like group about the Italian, watching them for some minutes. Then he came towards the house. His face was dimly familiar to Alan, though he could not say where he had seen it. It was a brutal face, broad and stupid against a shock of dirty flaxen hair. He made as if he would pass the door, and then swung suddenly, facing Price and Macpherson.

To Alan, ten yards away, there came an aching sense that something was going to happen, a sense of some

impending horror, a sense of his own utter helplessness. He would have run towards this man, shouting a warning to his uncle, but he was powerless to move? Macpherson's words seemed to boom horribly in his ears—"Men are sometimes killed in these rows—Men are sometimes killed in these rows."

For there was no mistaking the attitude of the man with the tin can. He meant death—or worse—for Donald Price, who stood facing him quietly in the sunlit doorway. The sense of sudden horror beat on Alan's heart. He fancied he had shouted his terror, but only a faint, wordless sound came from his cold lips. The group of men about the Italian did not even look up.

But that sense of danger had reached another heart than his. He saw the man suddenly raise the can he carried; he saw Donald Price, shaken from his steadiness, shrink back with both arms shielding his face. He saw the tiny spurt of flame, the white blotch above his shoulder. The man stood for a minute swaying, and then fell—the contents of the can flooding around him—shot by Macpherson.

In an instant the group about the Italian had broken and fled towards the house shouting. Alan ran with them and reached the spot with them. There were a few moments of confusion, of hoarse question and answer.

Then the horror and the fear at Alan's heart were voiced by a foreman—"Boys," he cried fiercely, "it's vitriol! He was going to vitriol the contractor!" Again Alan heard the low drone of anger rising from many men, as he had heard it on the night of the explosion.

He was not quite recovered from his illness, and it shook his nerves anew.

The men swung on the groaning figure at their feet, turning him over. He was already horribly burned from the action of the vitriol. But the foreman knew him.

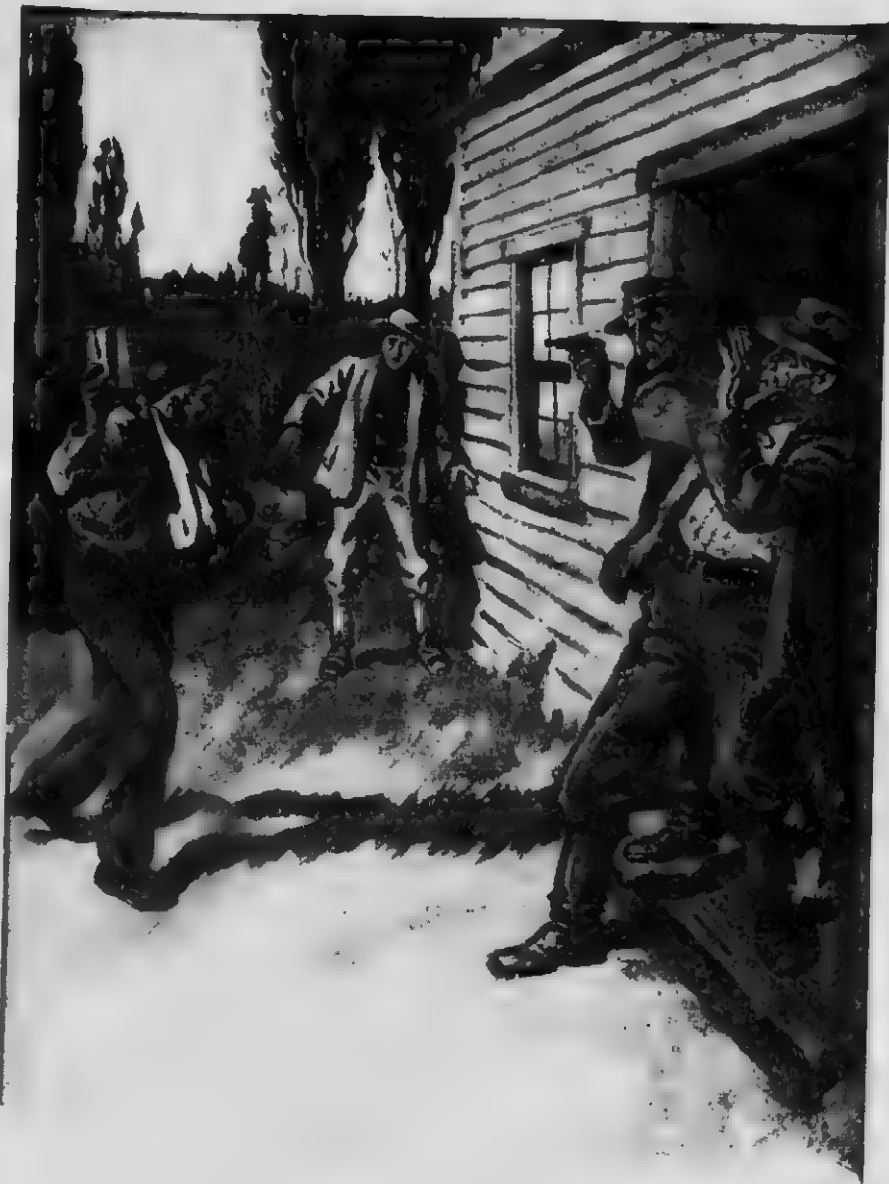
"He's the man that's been missin'," he cried, "he's one of our own Finns. And he tried to vitriol the contractor."

Some of the rougher spirits might have wreaked bitter vengeance on the injured wretch at their feet, for they loved Donald Price. But Burke was before them. He leaped from the door and looked with clenched fists and a wolf-like snarl on the groaning Finn.

"Vitriol?" he cried. "I'll have none o' such coward's stuff here. I'd nought to do with this, Donald Price. It's a pity you did not kill the hound." He growled at the fallen man so savagely that Macpherson edged forward. But Burke had no eyes for anyone but the contractor. "I'd no hand in this, ye brave man," he said steadily, "believe it or not as ye like."

The men crowded about him, threatening, hot with anger, ready for any fierce revenge. But his indifference to them had in it something almost grand, and drew a thrill of reluctant admiration from Alan. "Believe me or not, as ye please," said Burke, facing Price.

Price answered quietly, "I believe you," and turned away. "As the man's one of our own, you'd better take him back to camp and put him in hospital there," he said. His face was rather white under the tan, but he showed no other consciousness of his narrow escape from something worse than death.



"HE SAW THE MAN SUDDENLY RAISE THE CAN HE CARRIED."

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Burke stepped after him, a gleam in his fierce eyes. "A word with you," he said gruffly. And as Price turned—"Ye're such a brave man I'm sorry I'm against ye. But against ye I am until this section o' your Road's finished, for I'm faithful to them that pays me. So your enemy I am, and ye may look for trouble. Yet this much I'll tell ye. I'll make your men drunk and I'll hinder your work when I get the chance, and it's up to you to prevent me. But there's some things I'll not lay my hand to. I'll have none o' bullets in the back or vitriol in the face, or such like dirtiness. I'll fight ye, but not in that way. And so I tells you."

A gleam of humour, a touch of surprise, a warmth of something that was almost approval, showed in the contractor's face. "Thank you, Burke," he said, "an honest enemy is better than a dishonest friend."

A dark flash rose in Burke's face, so reckless, so fierce, so strong under it's evil. "Have ye a—a—hand for an honest enemy?" he asked with his rough laugh.

Price put out his hand gravely. "I hope it'll be the hand of a friend one day," he said as he turned away.

"And now you look out for yourself, Mister Price," Burke roared after him almost amiably.

It was an unutterably weary party who climbed on the cars behind Five-Nought-Seven, dragging the runaways with them. Yet Price did not look wholly dissatisfied. "The older I get," he said thoughtfully to Macpherson, "the more I recognise that no man's altogether bad. There's good in Burke, even."

Macpherson grunted, "No one but you'd find it, though," he said, the light of a great friendship in his eyes.

"I wonder what the next move will be," Price went on, pulling at his beard. "He thinks we're foemen worthy of his steel, Mac. By the way, old fellow, I didn't thank you for saving me to-day."

"Oh, dry up!" answered Macpherson sourly; "it's all in the day's work. I'm losin' my aim, though. I didn't mean to do more than wing the brute."

"You talk as if you were in the habit of going about taking pot-shots," Alan shouted above the clatter of the wheels.

Macpherson's long face grew longer and more gloomy. "When I was in Mexico," he said slowly, "I used to be pretty free with firearms. Once our pay-boss was attacked by brigands. They rode up one behind the other and I shot five of them with one bullet—five and a half, I should say, because there was an Injun at the end who stopped that bullet. Yes, sir, five and a half."

"Why do you tell me these yarns?" demanded Alan reproachfully, nettled by a gurgle of laughter from the men who could hear.

"Why are you so fond o' butting into other people's affairs?" returned Macpherson mildly.

And Alan subsided into silence, flushed and a little indignant. "I am fond of butting in," he told himself honestly.

And presently, meeting Mac's sardonic grin, he replied with a reluctant smile.

"The youngster's coming on," bellowed Macpherson in Price's ear. "He ain't nearly on the roof as he used to be."

Five-Nought-Seven swung them away from the hills,

into the wooded country through which the road now ran. Summer was aflame on bush and brier; the trees, in their full maturity of leaf, stood still in the heavy golden air. These scanty woods had scarcely been visited by man until the Road tore through their silences, and laid the steel link of civilization where even the foot of the Indian hunter had scarcely trodden the ground. But Alan's brain was busy with other things than the beauty and loneliness of the woods. "Uncle Don," he said, "I think the man who tried to vitriol you to-day was the same man who tried to stop me in the woods that night—the one that I thought Lucy Gray had killed."

"If that was so," said Price, far more troubled over the memory of Alan's danger than his own, "Lucy may have saved you from a good deal. Perhaps in the moonlight he mistook you for me, we're much of a size, —and he may not have known I was in the city. He evidently bore a grudge against me. Why, I can't remember; no, I can't remember at all." He tugged at his beard puzzled. "I hope he had no injustice to complain of," he went on anxiously.

"Ay tink I know, mister," said a Swede behind him. "Ay tink you punk him one in der eye for he misuse a horse."

"Ah!" said Price, "I believe you are right. Then Burke had no hand in that attack on Alan either. Somehow I'm glad of that," he finished with an air of relief.

The camp came suddenly into view beyond a cutting. Far up the line they could see the busy black gangs of men, swarming like ants. The Road was pushing

forward quickly. A ravine, deep and narrow, was being spanned by a tall spidery trestle. Price would have preferred filling it in solid, as he had filled in others in course of construction. But the ground was still rocky, covered with a skin of earth, and no materials offered for such a massive undertaking.

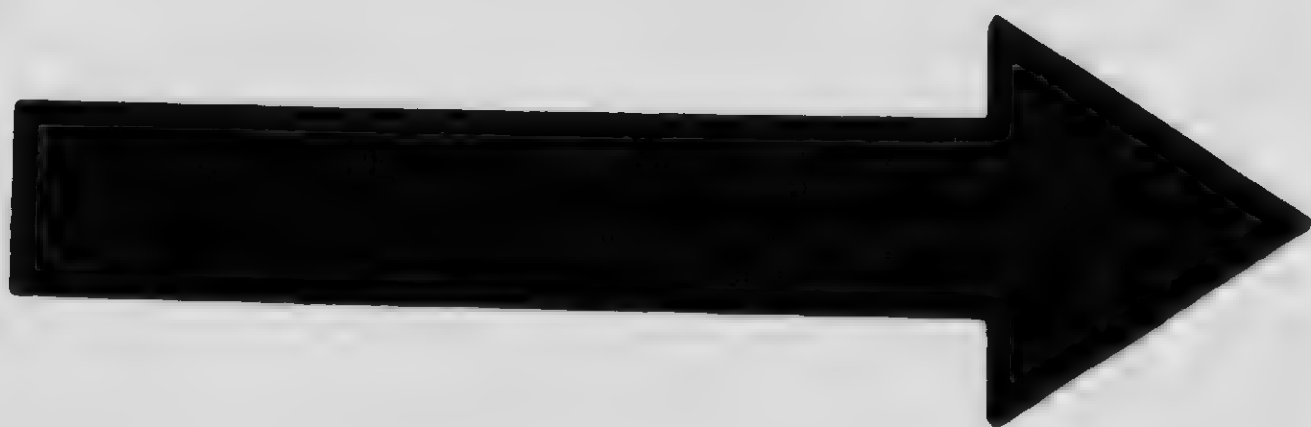
"But that trestle's a weak point," said Price to himself as Five-Nought-Seven drew into camp.

CHAPTER IX.

FIVE-NOUGHT-SEVEN.

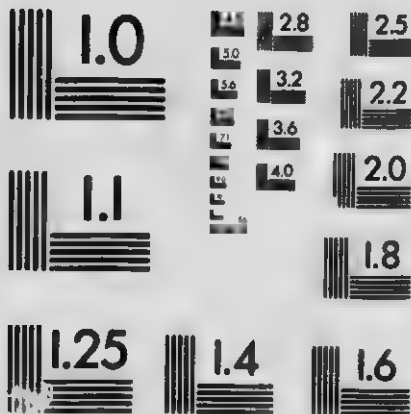
WHILE Summer changed to early Fall the Road pressed forward, the "way in the wilderness" became nearer and nearer to being an accomplished fact. Price had as many things as ever to fight against; two new locomotives, building at the shops, were mysteriously delayed in spite of the efforts of the syndicate, and rails were unaccountably slow in delivery. Whereupon Price departed again for the city, and conferred long with Mr. Merrick. And Mr. Merrick went forth in his turn and conferred strenuously with the heads of certain firms; by the gift of words and the power of voice contriving, as he said, "to put the fear of the Lord into souls to which that fear might reasonably be supposed a stranger." After that things went on with some smoothness. The "bluff" survey seemed likely to lead to nothing. Sheer enmity and spite moving the hearts of the enemies of the Road, rather than any definite hope of gain. "Old Kemp's son-in-law tried to get the contract for these two sections," said Price, "and it is said the old man pulled every string in his hands, and for a wonder, pulled in vain. That's why he's so bitter. Doesn't it shock you, Alan? It shocks me when I stop to think of it all."

Alan was shocked at these revelations of the hidden



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dishonesty and the petty motives that lurked behind so much modern business. In his simple young creed honesty had ever been the best policy. He found it hard to believe that men of standing in this world, men who went to church and helped to support hospitals, had one standard of honesty for their social life and quite another for their business life.

As time went on, the sense of strain and tension increased. A sense of triumph was also beginning to dawn in the hearts of those few who knew all the Road had to contend against. Kemp had the reputation of having at all times all sorts of reckless tools ready to his unscrupulous hand. And Price was surprised that no more had been heard of Burke, than whom a more effective tool could scarcely be imagined.

The actual difficulties of the work had rather increased than otherwise with the change in the character of the country. Price knew the need for haste ; but also he knew the need for good work, work that would last and serve well the great future of the country. The rocky plateau broke down into rolling land lightly wooded, cut across with ravines ; and, as has been said before, most of these were filled in solidly with embankments, across which ran the level road. For many miles it was a case of cut and fill in, cut and fill in. And the Road ran as smoothly as a table. But now the up-and-down grades became more frequent, and need arose for the big trestle. Of that more hereafter.

As the work advanced further and further from the source of supplies, so these supplies became harder and harder to procure on time. The locos in use were old and slow, with the exception of Five-Nought-Seven.

Price longed to go out into the highways and steal engines, for the two new ones were not yet built, and Five-Nought-Seven was never at rest except when she was under repairs. And under repairs she was. Kenway, her driver, demanded new boiler-tubes. And such was Kenway's reputation that he never had to ask for a thing twice.

So Five-Nought-Seven departed to Westaway Junction, and thence was taken, "dead," to the repair shops. When she was ready, Kenway took her on at Westaway again. And with her he took half-a-dozen flatcars of badly-wanted rails which had apparently been floating round the yards at the Junction for some time. No one seemed to know anything about them. So Kenway hunted them upon his own initiative, and was bearing them back in triumph to Donald Price, who had been losing sleep over them for a week. With them was Alan. As Macpherson said, Alan managed to be in everything that was going. This time he had been sent to Westaway on some unimportant errand for his uncle, and had seized the opportunity of returning with Kenway, nothing loth to escape the grade-pegs for a day or so. Perhaps his uncle knew of this and was reluctant to work a willing colt too hard. But this colt had learned to love his harness. Alan was changed indeed from the sullen, self-indulgent lad his uncle had first known. He rejoiced in everything connected with the Road.

Particularly he rejoiced in the rush and roar of Five-Nought-Seven as she swept them back to camp. Kenway was voluble as to the result of the repairs, and became, in his enthusiasm, so highly technical that Alan

understood about one word in four. It was the last thing that anybody ever expected that any hostile influence should reach to the repair shops. But so it did, though clear proof was never found.

Alan hung from the grimy cars as Five-Nought-Seven fled along the brightening rails. He had the fancy, caught, maybe, from the railroad men he lived among, that Five-Nought-Seven had some sort of soul or consciousness in her shell, and that she also was rejoicing to escape from her hospital and return to the scenes of her toil.

"She is returnin' to camp," quoth the grizzled Kenway, "bringin', as you might say, her sheaves with her. They said at the yards that steel was planed lumber for a new furniture factory. 'Furniture factory to supply the Injuns with afternoon-tea-tables, I suppose,' ses I. 'I'm goin' to look.' And sure enough, 'twas the steel." He leaned out of the cab. "This is a road any man would like to send a loco over. Smooth as cream, it is. For keepin an eye on everythin' to once, your uncle can't be beat. Hear her hum, now! Five-Nought-Seven ain't much to look at, and she needs paint awful. But she can go."

She could go. Her throttle was wide as Kenway rushed her through the cuttings and over the long levels. Every now and again a hollow or ravine opened out to their sight, and it was as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with a glow of red and gold. For the first frosts had lightly touched the lands to a beauty so warm, so dreamy, so evanescent, it seemed like a memory of spring rather than a herald of winter. A lilac haze veiled the distances, and the grass, bleached almost

white, was set with the jewels of the early autumn flowers. The country seemed turning to one great piece of jewel work—sapphire, emerald, ruby, sardonyx, and chrysolite, beryl and opal,—wrought by the Master Craftsman. Even the leaves that whirled in the track of Five-Nought-Seven were frosted with gold upon their lingering green.

The beauty of the day stimulated Kenway to such heights of technicality that Alan's attention wandered more and more. He was struck anew with the splendour of enterprise in which he held a little part. As Five-Nought-Seven sped upon her shining way, it seemed to him that he had reached a little space of rest and idleness, that he might more clearly view the labour stretching before and behind. He remembered himself as he had been. And then he looked forward to himself as he would like to be. A little while ago he had been contented with himself as he was.

A sensation of peace and rest often comes before a great trial of mind or soul. It is the stillness before the storm. Alan tasted the stillness to the full for a sunlit hour or so, and was strengthened thereby to face the following storm. That storm came suddenly, without an instant's warning.

A great scalding roar of steam filled the cab of the engine. It blew the fire before it from the fire-box, and Alan felt himself stung with burns as well as with the steam. He saw Kenway leap back, his hands before his face, stagger and fall heavily to the floor, striking his head as he did so. He saw the fireman drop his shovel, though the roar of the steam was so fierce he could not hear it fall. He caught a glimpse of the man, his arms

shielding his head, jumping from the cab in sudden panic.

It all happened in a moment, and the swirl and roar of the escaping steam increased. Alan could scarcely move from the corner where he crouched. Under the death-dealing, wool-white cloud he peered, and saw that Kenway lay as he had fallen, either unconscious or dead. His head was in the rush of air, and there was blood upon the floor where he had fallen. The roar of the steam continued. And Alan felt Five-Nought-Seven's speed increase with great erratic throbs. The woods fled past, a long, blurred ribbon of delicate colours, the rails were quivering streams beneath her furious wheels. She carcenod from side to side like a ship. At the curves it seemed that she could not long keep the track. Thus the storm of sudden events fell upon Alan, leaving him dazed for a moment.

But only for a moment. It is perhaps most clearly before an unexpected disaster that the stuff of the soul shows itself. A little while before, the shock of such disaster would have left the lad passive as a straw in the grip of fierce currents. He would not have turned craven before the terrors of the situation, but neither would he have risen to the strength of controlling it.

This situation was uncomprehended, and sprung from him without warning. He only knew that something had gone wrong with the boiler and that he was alone in the cab of a "wild" engine with an unconscious driver. For a few seconds his bewildered brain groped in vain for the means to save them both; for he could not get near the throttle and live. He tried, and the fierce steam beat him back.

He dare not wait for Five-Nought-Seven to blow off all her steam and stop of her own accord, for he did not know what might be ahead of them on the track. Kenway alone knew, and he was lying as one dead. And the pace of the runaway was by now the pace of madness, and destruction was imminent.

"O God," cried Alan, not knowing he cried aloud. "O God, show me what I must do!" And in a moment it came to him clearly what he must do. He must crawl from the car, over the tender, and set the brakes one by one against the locomotive.

No sooner thought than acted upon. He was used to crawling about construction trains. But to creep from the cab of a runaway engine over the rocking tender to the clattering cars was something different. But he managed it. He crawled over the coal and set the brakes one by one. By now Five-Nought-Seven was slowing up of her own accord, and the brakes brought her to a standstill in a shrieking cloud of steam. Alan leaped from the cars and hurried to the cab, from which he managed to drag Kenway. Then he stood beside the track, wondering what to do next. For he was still an hour's run from camp, with an injured man on his hands and a damaged loco blocking the line.

"I was at the end of my wits," said Alan afterwards, "when old Nought-Nine came down the line with a couple of empty trucks. They pulled up when they saw Five-Nought-Seven and us beside the track. And then they hitched Five-Nought-Seven to Nought-Nine, loaded us on to a car, and backed off to camp again at a funeral march. And it took us nearly three hours to get there."

But that was not all. Kenway was about again in a

week, though badly scalded. And he had seen Donald Price while he was in the hospital. The result of that interview was that the contractor and another driver thoroughly investigated Five-Nought-Seven's repairs before the loco went down to the repair shops for the second time. And when she did go, with her went a letter from Price, wherein he dealt thoroughly with the repairers, their manners, their methods, and their morals. For it was found that an unsafe piece of old piping had been put back in the boiler of Five-Nought-Seven where old pipe had neither reason nor excuse to be. "They'll claim carelessness or economy and sack some scapegoat of a fitter," said Kenway, glowering under his bandages, "but they showed me that bit o' pipe. And it *couldn't* have been put in unknowin'. It was rotten, fair rotten, and split from end to end. Don't tell me." He was about again in time to take over Five-Nought-Seven again when she came back.

"That's a smart nephew of yours, sir," he said to Donald Price; "he done the only thing to do and done it quick, which, with locos is the only way to do at all. I'm owin' a good deal to his quick wits." So Alan won another friend, and Donald Price another proof of the far-reaching hand of his enemy.

Over the sunlit lands went the great Road. The big trestle beyond the railhead was all but finished. Coming back from his work ahead of the grading gangs, Alan nightly walked the airy constructions with a careless eye and steady head. The whitish timbers, criss-crossing far beneath him in an intricate web, the sheer look down to the bed of the ravine and the tops of the spruces, troubled him not. Macpherson frankly hated it.

"You're like your uncle," he said, "and a seat on the top of a hundred foot scaffolding pole is comfort to him. These trestles make me feel just sick."

"Uncle does not like 'em in other ways," said Alan. "He says they are weak points. Why?"

"In the sense that anything not built to last is a weak point, I suppose," answered Macpherson. "Price is great on stability. Stability is his fetish."

"It's a good one," said Alan.

"One that the new world counts too lightly," agreed Macpherson. "Oh, I'm dizzy."

"Don't look down," said Alan, "look at the sunset. It's lovely."

Lovely it was. A clear sheet of rose, rimmed with golden clouds like foam upon a wave. A wind seemed to sigh from the heart of it, and that wind was as hot as the breath of a furnace. The bottom of the ravine was carpeted with such colours as could not be woven in any loom.

"I can scarcely believe there was frost a few nights ago," said Alan. "It's hot as summer."

"Indian summer," said Macpherson. "I wish we could get rain."

"Why?" asked Alan again.

But Macpherson did not answer; only stared at the gray haze drawn over the sunset.

CHAPTER X.

BURKE'S LAST MOVE.

NEXT morning Alan found the camp deserted when he stepped from the rickety old car where he slept. Looking up the long line of the Road, running straight here for forty miles without a curve, he saw that the steam-graders were idle. Looking in the other direction, he saw that there were no gangs at work upon the rails. But upon the bluff beyond the trestle clustered a black swarm of men, strangely still and silent, facing the west. The pale, reflected light beat upon their faces. To them Alan went. Such was the sense of coming trial in the air, such the utter quietness of the crowd, all differing nationalities uniting in a fear common to all, that he asked no questions. Only gazed in the direction to which the sea of motionless faces was addressed.

At first he saw nothing of moment. The dawn was glowing in red behind him, and a faint roseate light should have answered in the west. But the west was veiled in gray. Promise of rain, he would have said; but the wind, born in the grayness, was very dry, and hot; strangely hot. The leaves of the bushes moved uneasily in it.

The ravine ran out into the dimness. It was one of a long chain of such valleys, lightly wooded and curiously

parted from the wooded hills by great hog-backs of rock, and the intricate windings of a small river which ended in white falls and a small lake in one of the ravines. Alan gazed up the rock-walled cleft as the others were gazing; the gray haze seemed concentrated as the light grew clearer. It seemed like a cloud hanging about the head of the system of interchanged ravines.

"It's scarce eight miles away," said a low voice behind him. He turned towards the man who had spoken, intending to question him; but the unspoken question was answered before he had time to do so. For the hot west wind rustled down the ravine again, and beat in his face; and with it came the stinging smell of wood-smoke.

The men stirred uneasily, but without withdrawing their somnolent eyes from the west. Birds, silent and swift, flew over their heads towards the dawn. Once a deer galloped beneath them down the length of the ravine, careless of mankind, all lesser fears whelmed in the great fear of fire. He cleared the scattered timbers gallantly, and was gone. One of the men said, "Good luck to you," and by that broke the spell of silence.

The men began to stir and speak. The whole crowd moved uneasily upon its own centre, like a herd of "milling" cattle. Hands pointed and waved, a dozen foremen tried to make themselves heard at the same time, and signalling failed. Alan could not have pointed to any man who was making much noise, but the blent murmurs of the multitude made a sea-like, ceaseless roar. He felt that fear was infectious, a sort of moral disease, that flashed from soul to soul. He dreaded lest

it should touch him also, and would have withdrawn from the crowd, but the fascination of that gray cloud above the valley's head held him, as it held them, captive.

Yet the massed faces turned away from the west when Donald Price appeared among them and above them at the very head of the hillock. A hundred voices began explaining things to him, but he quietly waved them to silence. "I know," said he. "It's a bush-fire coming straight down the ravine. The camp's safe, and so, I think, are the other woods. But it concerns us to this extent, that if we don't check it, our tre-tle will go. And that we can't afford. That bush-fire must be checked."

There was silence. Then an elderly man spoke up from the crowd. "I guess it might be done, sir," he said slowly, "half-a-mile below here where the ravine narrows. 'Tis mostly bare rock there, and if we can but hold the fire in check, it'll burn itself out. I've fought 'em before on the prairie and in the forest, and I've been a ranger in my time. It can be done, but"—he paused—"it'll be a hard and risky fight."

"We'll try it," said Price, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Who'll volunteer?" He stood in full view upon the knoll, cool, alert, masterful, the light of battle in his gray eyes. And man after man responded. Where the contractor led, nearly every man in camp was willing to follow. The ex-ranger first, and Macpherson a close second. The others followed in tens and twenties un' l perhaps a hundred men were waiting to be led against the dreaded foe. Alan was among them.

Price's keen eyes picked the lad out in a second ;

and it is possible he was going to bid him stay behind. But he bit the words back. He had no right to say them; he had no better reason than that he loved the eager youngster. Alan must take his chances with the rest, and Alan was fain to do so.

In another moment the camp was seething with men. All the rolling-stock on the spot was impressed to carry water to the trestle, and half-a-hundred men filled the barrels and loaded them on the flat-cars. The Italians who were willing went off at the double, spade and axe on shoulder, to the bottom of the ravine, where the work was ready for them. The others, the best of all who had volunteered for the post of danger, prepared wetted horse-blankets, boughs, spades, as their weapons. Alan was among those on the first fighting line.

The plan of defence was simple, yet had some chance of proving effective. At the narrowest part of the ravine, where the rock-walls were bare from base to summit, the ground was to be hastily cleared of every bush, and the very earth turned and soaked with water. The bare space was to be made as wide as possible, between the outcrop of rock and the trestle. And here the stand was to be made. If the fire could be kept penned in here for long enough, it would die for lack of food. Herein lay the chance of safety for the trestle.

The ex-ranger, one Archibald, took command of the first fighting line, Price of the second. The first line of men was to face the fire on the further side of the cleared space; the second line was to supply men for vacancies in their ranks, keep them supplied with water, and see

that no tongue of fire leaped the barrier of wet earth. Price said he would stay with those to encourage the faint-hearted, but no one believed him. They all knew that wherever the battle, he would be in the forefront; and they loved him for it.

Alan toiled and struggled with the rest. As the yards of shallow earth were laid bare and turned by the busy spades, men came staggering under great pails of water and drenched the thirsty soil. The air in the bottom of the ravine grew blue and stagnant with smoke. The hot wind faltered and sank except for a few scorching puffs heavy with the poignant reek of burning underbrush. The workers were glad to drink deeply of the water brought for their use. They were drenched with perspiration in a few minutes, gasping for breath.

To Alan it seemed that the belt of dark earth spread from side to side of the ravine with incredible speed. Minute by minute, too, it widened, and every yard added to its width meant a better chance of blocking the fire. Soon the blue reek of smoke driving before the fire, grew almost unbearable, and men paused in their desperate toil to knot wet handkerchiefs across their faces. Some lay down with faces to the earth for a moment, to snatch a few refreshing breaths of purer air, and then fell upon their task with renewed vigour. The belt of dark rough soil widened momentarily, and the chance of victory increased with it.

Archibald, with a sharp whistle, gathered his men together. They knew the fire must be near and prepared to meet it. The men of the second line, if their peril was less, never for a moment rested in their

efforts. Between the two lines went the contractor, cheering, encouraging, restraining. No one had so much at stake as he. No one was so calm.

Alan, in the first line, caught his first glimpse of the fire beneath the lifted gray veil. He had expected a splendid spectacle of ruddy rage and horror. He saw a dull canker devouring the grass and the bushes, leaving a hot black desolation behind it, pushing its pale edge resistlessly forward towards them. Its cause was almost invisible save when a large bush caught, and flared for a moment like a torch ; only the effect could fully be seen. It was like a dark pestilence annihilating the undergrowth, and its ceaseless low crackle was far more full of terror than the riot and roar Alan had expected. The men crouched in their stations, their eyes narrowed to keen slits, like a line of wrestlers about to leap upon an almost unseen enemy.

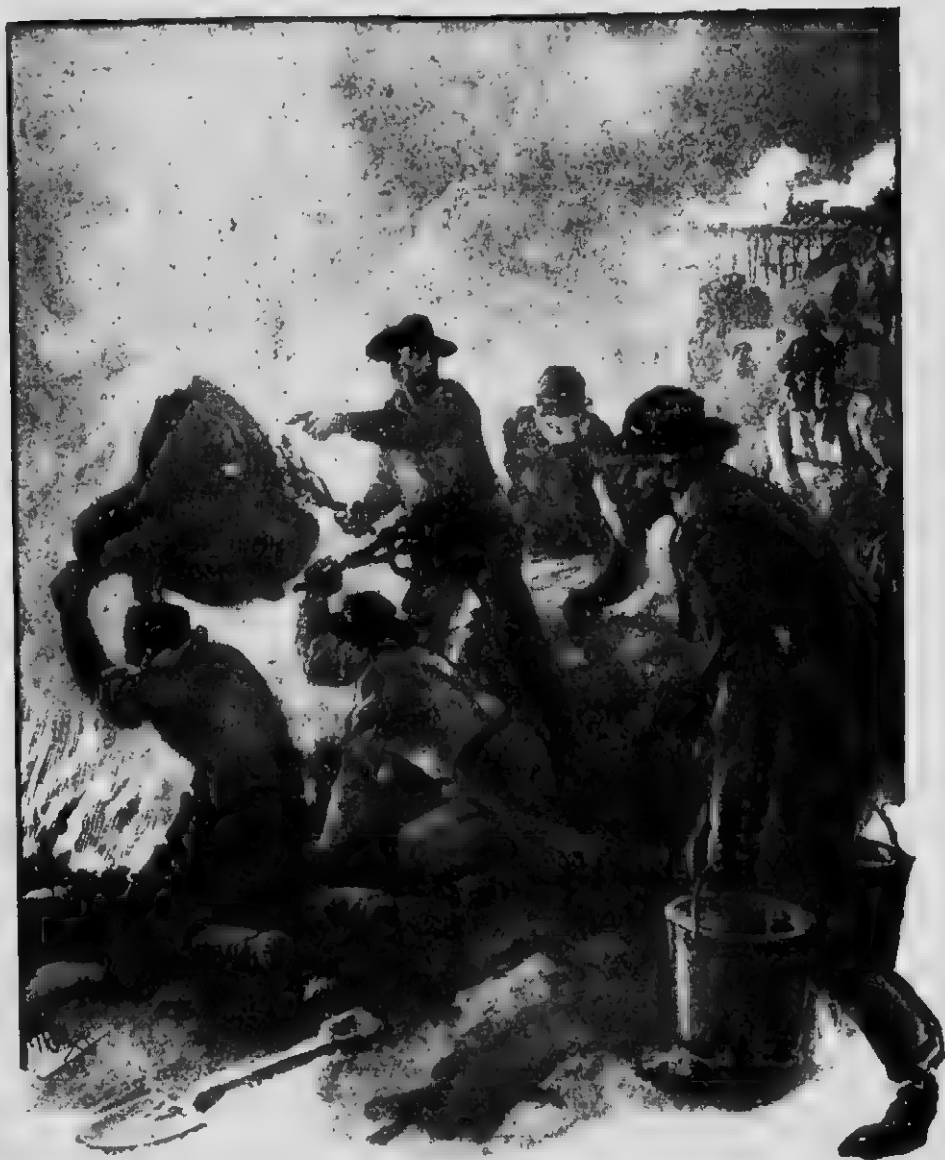
The advancing edge of the canker seemed to be moving but slowly ; the heart of a young poplar caught and flamed heavenward and was devoured. The heat began to beat upon them, and they felt as if the skin of their cheeks must crack. They knotted their wet handkerchiefs higher and their faces grew more grim. Yet the fire was less than it had been ; already, before it reached them, it had failed somewhat for lack of thicker growth. To this perhaps they owed their safety.

A spark fell at a man's knees, and a knot of dry grass caught and spat flame. He beat it out with the great wet spruce-bough he carried. It was the first blow struck. Another moment and the great war had begun.

It was the end of all clear thought, or speech, or sight, or memory. The first line was beaten back on to the bare earth that was its citadel, and there they turned at bay, and fought furiously with the flaming edge of grass and brushwood. The second aided them nobly, drenching them with the water continually arriving, flooding the hissing ground about them. Men fell to the ground, and were dragged back burnt and gasping, and others sprang into their places and fought to a finish. Clots of light fire floated over the bare ground, and the Italians beat these out with boot and spade. A continual stream of men kept arriving with full buckets and departing with empty ones. The ravine hummed like a hive, and the engines at the railhead shrieked their encouragement to the men who were fighting the battle of the Road.

Alan was aware that his uncle fought by his side. Once a spark set fire to the flowing fair beard, and he stopped and beat it out with his hands, and toiled on again, a queer blackened stubble upon his chin, an unquenchable light in his eyes. His big voice sounded above the crackle of the fire, cheering his men on, like a general of old cheering his troops against the foe. Once, Alan dropped, overcome with the heat; and Price dragged him back to the water-buckets, and was in his own place again before the blaze in the grass gained headway. In a few minutes Alan rejoined him, wet and scorched, and fell to work again in dogged silence. They were a well-matched pair in that heroic line.

And they held the fire. The fierce beat of heat sank to a glow, the glow died to a smoulder. The



"A CONTINUAL STREAM OF MEN KEPT ARRIVING WITH FULL BUCKETS."
[p. 102.]

weak wind behind drove the fire on, the indomitable men held it back. And it sank and died like a fierce beast, running for a hiding-place in the interlaced roots of grass and bush. And when those were devoured, it died on the bare rock undergrowth.

The defenders became the aggressors. They soaked the smouldering light leaf-ash with water, they sought out the fire in its fastnesses and smothered it with wet horsecloths. The men staggering under the buckets had time to ask the second line how they did. Not a man in either line but was marked with the signs of the fight. The engines' scream in their dazed ears took on a note of victory, the heat in their scorched faces grew less fierce, the red eating edge of the pestilence sank to dead hot white and black. "We're beating it," cried Price, his voice a hoarse croak from heat and smoke, "we're beating it! Stick to it, men, stick to it!" They stuck to it splendidly, and the fire died slowly before their onslaught.

Alan could scarcely see. His smarting eyes were filmed with water, his labouring lungs seemed on fire, he imagined that his nose must be charred and gone, but found it only sore and swollen. Mechanically he and the others still beat and pounded and smothered, with arms almost too weary to hold their weapons. The smoke lifted and faded in blurred clouds of blue spirals, but the grayness did not lift. A mutter of thunder rolled from rock to rock, a flare of lightning shot across, and then, in great heavy drops, fell the rain.

There had been thunder-showers almost daily during that hot unseasonable summer. Yet who might say that this one was for that any the less God-given, God-

sent? It sealed their victory for them. Before that silver rush and roar the last of the fire died like bitter hissing snakes. The men bent back their scorched faces and let the cool drops beat upon them like the very water of life. They ran and rolled like dogs in the wet grass, and stretched out their arms to the storm, so great was Nature's craving for sweet water after that turmoil of heat and smoke. Their work was done. They might leave the rest to this God-sent ally, who drove silver-footed across the smoking wastes, whose glittering banners and dark pennons were bright with victory in their eyes.

They had beaten the fire. The news sped roaring back from mouth to mouth, and the engines hissing at the railhead howled anew in triumph. Men would have led the fire-fighters to shelter and care, but they fought to lie still and soak in the rain that was beating on their charred rags and stinging sweetly in their swollen faces.

Many fell asleep as they lay, and were dragged from the scene of battle by their admiring fellows. Alan dimly saw Macpherson so dragged by the heels. Any man being dragged along the grass by the heels of his top-boots looks excessively dead. Alan was troubled for a moment, but that passed. Nothing was real but the rest, and the blessed, blessed rain.

CHAPTER XI.

VICTORY.

THE rain continued for a time in its full rush, and the men lay still in it, gasping. Only when it changed to intermittent bursts, shot across with bars of sunlight as thick and heavy as cornmeal and as golden to the sight, did they begin to move and drag themselves to their feet. Scores of their fellows were about them, chattering and cheering; but the men who had fought the fire were strangely quiet. In their hard lives they faced death daily, and with a carelessness as heroic as it was pitiful. But that valley of fire would not fade quickly from even their memories—hardened as they were with the rough life they led. If the fire had leapt their clearing, they would have died in the midst of it. They thought of that when it was over, and some of them shuddered. Price thought of it, and his heart smote him. He had risked life for the trestle. But again the thought passed. The trestle was safe, and they were but servants of the Road. They stared at each other, haggard and scorched, through the lingering blue reeks of smoke, and one after another whispered solemnly, "The trestle's safe," with dry lips. They, the servants of the Road, saw no discrepancy between their sufferings and the object for which they had endured them.

"The trestle's safe," they repeated, hand clasping scorched hand. And they tried to join in the cheers, but could make no sound but gasping sort of croaks. The rain passed in a last glittering rush, and the sun flared broadly forth again, and shone on the steaming blackened soil, on the scorched grasses, on the high spruce boughs strung with a myriad diamonds.

Alan pulled himself out of the mud with some reluctance, and went to see after Macpherson. He found that gentleman seated on an upturned bucket, carefully cleaning his boots with a red handkerchief that was certainly not his own. He turned a rather white face to the lad, and nodded in silence.

"I—I thought maybe you were dead," said Alan in what he felt was an utterly idiotic manner.

"Well, you see I ain't," Macpherson answered in a tone suggestive of gloom. "Lend me your handkerchief, Hope. I believe these boots are ruined."

Alan handed over the required article, and Macpherson fell to work with an anxious face. Alan also was conscious of a deep anxiety as to the fate of the boots. They seemed to be much more important than the trestle.

"They look kind of stiff," he ventured; "perhaps if you soaked them in castor oil——"

"Go soak your head in it!" sourly advised Macpherson. "But you're right. They are stiff. If they're spoiled," he continued in a voice of a quarrelsome sound, "the syndicate shall pay for a new pair—or your uncle. Yes, that old mule Price shall fork out for a new pair for leading me into danger like this." He mourned over the burnt boots, and fell to

rubbing them anew. Alan was conscious that the boots were a great loss ; and he was conscious that the dignity of Macpherson's appearance was seriously marred by yellow-striped socks. They worried him, these socks. He never bought anything gayer himself than black with red spots. And here was Mac, a man fifteen years older—

"Hullo!" said Murchison, trotting up. "You two look a pair of wrecks. Let's see that arm, Mac."

"Lemme alone," snapped Macpherson, jumping to his feet and waving a boot above the doctor's head, "I'm not hurt. Look what that oid crumpet-faced donkey Price has cost me in boots!"

"Steady, old chap," said the doctor soothingly. "That's fierce about the boots. But I wouldn't call Price names if I were you. Phew! that's badly burned!"

"He's a muffin-headed mule with a blister on his nose," declared Mac, and collapsed, very white, on the bucket again. Alan began to snigger and couldn't stop sniggering.

"I wish you'd ask Mac not to wear those yellow socks," he besought the doctor tearfully.

"Shut both your silly heads!" commanded the little doctor. "I'd as soon attend a girls' school as you. Mac, if you don't stop, I'll land you one with a shovel. Hope, go and get me another bandage. They're over there behind that tree. Your boots be sugared. It's your arm I want to see." An excellent tonic was Dr. Murchison, an excellent man to take hold of a situation. Overstrained nerves steadied under his tongue, pain was soothed under his hands. He and Price brought the fire-fighters to some degree of intelligence in ten minutes.

The trestle was saved. In a week steel was laid over it, and the creamy-coloured, spidery construction was no longer the centre of interest. Save when their burns smarted, most of the men had forgotten the stress and strange emotion of their battle and victory in the ravine. Those who thought much of the matter—Price, Macpherson, Archibald the old ranger—kept their thoughts for the most part to themselves, and wondered what would happen next.

One day Burke came to the camp and asked for Donald Price. He was shown where Price was standing at the rail-head, and strode to him easily.

The contractor turned, and measured Burke with his keen, experienced eyes. He saw at once that the man was perfectly sober—had been sober for some days. The steady eyes were clear and quiet, the great shoulders erect, the powerful face of a fresher colour.

"D'you mind what I told you that day at my farm?" said Burke, meeting the glance. "Well, I've fought against you till I'm tired. Ye're a brave man, an' a white man, and I'd sooner be your friend than your enemy. I've broke with them who paid me to serve 'em, and serve 'em I did, faithful. But now I'd rather serve you."

Price's eyebrows drew together. "You're a bold man," he said sternly; "how would you serve me?"

"By workin' for you," said Burke. He drew nearer and looked Price in the eyes, and in that look their difference was forgotten. They only remembered the one or two things they had in common.

"There was a king I heard of once," said Burke with the rough eloquence that had been one of his powers

for evil, "a king in the long ago days, who cut up all sorts o' shins. He tried every sort o' wickedness, but in the long run he found good was better an' stuck to it. That's me. I'm tired of doin' evil to better men. I'd like to try the other thing for a while. There's no other man I'd say so much to but you." He glared at Price with his old expression of animal ferocity for a moment, and then his fierce eyes softened. "When you broke that keg o' whiskey on the rocks," he said, "I hated you, but I respected you. You can't be a very bad enemy to a man what you respects. I led you a dance for a while, but I'm done with it now." He stood like a savage bull, his head lowered, in his usual truculent attitude. But his speech was different and his eyes were changed.

Price was amazed and silent for a moment. There was something in the situation that touched his sense of humour. His brain told him that he ought to distrust Burke utterly, but he did not. He recognized that the man with his faithfulness, his fury, his brutality, his superb courage, belonged to an older age. Some fierce heathen Norseman might well have acted as Burke had done, selling his sword or his wits to the leader that would offer him most congenial employment. The man was an anachronism. Faith to the hand that paid him was his religion.

"But why do you want to work for me?" asked Price in a puzzled voice.

Burke drew nearer. "I told you as I was goin' to try keepin' straight for a time," he said half defiantly, "and if I am to, I must work an' work hard—work the devil out o' me. I've made no great success o' workin'

for myself. Give me a chance o' workin' for you."

The contractor turned and whistled to a foreman. "You've room for another man?" he said. "Yes, I thought so. Here he is, then."

Burke touched his finger to his hat brim, and, grinning, followed the foreman. When they were out of earshot, the foreman said something with much slyness and an air of admiration. Whereupon Burke methodically punched his superior into silence.

"Did you see *that*?" demanded Macpherson, astonished for once out of all self-possession.

"Did you never hear that sometimes it's best to be blind?" asked Price rather shortly. "Yes, you may stare, Mac, till your eyes drop out. Burke's one of our men now, for a time, anyhow. He said he wanted to keep straight and work for me, I don't know why. So I was bound to give him a chance."

"Well," remarked Macpherson feelingly, "you're either a wily old fox or you're—not."

"Time will show," replied Price peacefully. "I'm no judge of men if he's not as earnest in his friendship as he was in his enmity. Anyhow, it will be easier to keep an eye on him here than there if he does mean mischief."

But the enemies of the Road seemed weary of fighting their unfair war. The steel crept further and further into the wooded country. For the first time the sere yellow leaves of the late fall were whirled in the wake of an iron beast of man's construction. The moose-cow trembled and fled at the sound of that roaring monster. The lynx crouched deep-hidden, and snarled at this invasion of his hunting grounds. The antlered buck

pawed and snorted a vain defiance from his coverts at this foe who would neither stay nor heed. Through the chilling golden forests the great Road pushed, where a white man had scarcely been until the survey party blazed the untouched trees, and marked the land where the iron sign of man's dominion should be flung. The ancient solitudes, the lonely loveliness, these should be lonely no more. Good and evil the Road might bring in its train. Price hoped that the good would always be the greater, that those hands which guided its fortunes would ever be clean, that the souls of the Road's masters would remember something of the good of the many as well as the profit of the few. To him, and to a few of those who had toiled with him, the Road was sentient, alive, full of all possibility as the countries through which it ran. They had been long the servants of the Road. There was almost a touch of regret that others would before long be its masters.

"There are plenty more roads we'll try for the building of," said the contractor, "in this big new country."

Alan, to whom he had spoken, flushed eagerly. "I hope you'll find some work for me, Uncle Don," he said, "on whatever job you may be."

The big man's gray eyes twinkled. "I thought you lived in hopes of getting back to college, lad," he said, "and that all your work was but a means to that end. I fancy I heard something like that once."

"I daresay you did," Alan returned confidentially, "but I feel very different now, I can tell you. A fellow in college," quoth Alan wisely, "is apt to think that the

college is in the centre of creation, with a fringe around it composed of the rest of the world. And he's apt to think he's in the centre of the college. No, I couldn't go back to that now. It would seem so little and narrow, and stuffy. Uncle Don, I think I'm in love with this sort of work. I'd like nothing better."

Price listened in silence, his eyes softening. "Nor should I like anything better," he said, "than to have a lad like you to train and watch, to see you following in my steps, as it were, and going far beyond me, Alan—oh, far beyond me, please God. You know something now of the truth of things. You see the things I have had to fight, the spirit of the men who have set themselves against me. Those things you will have to fight too, if you are what I would have you to be; less and less, I trust, as the years go on; less and less, I hope and pray, as Canada comes to her own. But fight them you must, and your reward may be long in coming. It may never come in wealth, Alan."

"No," said Alan with a glowing face, "but perhaps it may come to me in the opinions of—of other men, as it has come to you, sir. I should be proud if ever people could say half of me what I hear them say of you. And I should have the work, I want to be an engineer; I must be an engineer. But I'll learn with you if you'll let me, learn as you learned. I might never be rich. Once I thought that was all there was worth working for, and lots of other fellows thought so too. But now I know it isn't. I want to work for the joy of the working, and to keep mother and Dona and Ludo in comfort. That's all. I don't want to go back

to college. College be sugared. Why, for all these months I've been living in the real thing, and you think I'd like to carry a transit round the park, or squint through a level in the middle of a driveway to impress the girls' schools out for an airing! No, thanks. Not for dis chile."

Price laughed softly, but his eyes looked very glad. "That's good hearing," he said, "and it's settled the matter, Alan. We won't send you back to college; but we won't keep you to grade pegs all your life. Mac says you can manage an instrument as well as he can. He's very pleased with you."

Alan blushed anew. "I didn't know there was much to be pleased about," he confessed; "setting pegs isn't a very difficult job; any one could do it as well."

"Perhaps so," replied Price dryly, "but I think it wasn't the actual pegging only he's pleased with. He says you never 'scamp' things. To 'scamp' things is to remain for ever in Macpherson's black books. He says you never pass an imperfect thing, be it ever so unimportant. And that pleases me, too. You've lots to learn yet, but you have made a good start. A very good start, Alan."

"Thanks to you," said Alan, "for you have taught me to love my work, and everything comes easy after that."

CHAPTER XII.

AND LAST.

FIVE-NOUGHT-SEVEN dropped Mr. Merrick at the camp one evening, a mild little gray figure with a bag in one hand that was somehow strongly suggestive of a reticule, and a neat umbrella in the other. The men were at supper for the most part, and the visitor saw no one to accost. He wandered to the cook-house, and regarded Ben doubtfully over his pince-nez.

Ben was in a heated mood, and his helpers likewise. He took a glance at the little gray figure in the door and spake. "If it is patent medicines," said he, "we don't want none. If it's tracks, we've got a better one in Blake. If it's business, which don't appear likely, this ain't the place to come about it. See?"

"Pardon me," replied Merrick—and Benny dropped a can of hot coffee and nearly jumped out of his boots at the volume of the voice—"I came here under a momentary and erroneous impression that this was the office. I see it is not. Will you kindly direct me aright? The dusk has confused my sense of locality."

"C-certainly, sir," responded the cook feebly. "Hi!—Mister Hope! Here's a gent wants the contractor. Will you brung him along?"

"Why, Mr. Merrick!" said Alan, swinging in at

the door. "Uncle was expecting you. Let me carry your bag. Have you seen the work?"

"I've only just arrived," explained the senior partner. "But I must confess the work seems to have progressed quickly. Nor is that the only reason for surprise. *Are you Alan Hope?*"

The voice carried far, and Alan flushed furiously. "Seems like it, sir," he acknowledged, "at least, I've always been under that impression. So have others."

"Ha!" replied Merrick. "When I first saw you, I thought my eyes had deceived me. You appear to have grown, my dear fellow; in more ways than one, if you will pardon my saying so?"

"This sort o' work knocks the nonsense out of a fellow," said Alan heartily. "It's fine work, sir. I expect you're sorry your lot lies in an office so much. I don't know what Uncle Don would do if he were tied down to a desk."

"I'd as soon try to tie a—a boxing kangaroo to a desk," thunderously replied Mr. Merrick, searching for a simile. "Price always has to be in the very middle of things. Be careful of that bag, my dear fellow. There are two valuable blue-prints in there as well as a bottle of Worcester sauce. If the bottle broke, the result might be disastrous."

"I heard you in the distance," said Donald Price at the door of his shack, "blowing your trumpet afar. That you, Alan? See you later."

Alan nodded and turned away into the frosty dark. He wondered what he should do next. Should he talk to Macpherson? No, Mac was reading in his bunk and was inclined to be morose. Should he go to the

reading-room until he fell asleep over a grimy magazine? No, the room would probably be stuffy with accumulated humanity. He would go for a walk before turning in.

A clear upland rose behind the camp, and the woods upon its crest showed in a delicate dark fringe upon the darker skies. It was the dark of unclouded air, in which the early stars hung invisibly suspended like crystal lamps—a dark of deepest sapphire, rimmed with a fine silver promise of frost. He turned to the almost leafless shadows of the woods.

His mind was busy with restless thoughts. When this work was drawing to its end; when his share in it should be done, that little share that meant so much to him; what should he do next? His uncle had said nothing definite. Other people had imagined that he would try to finish his college course somehow, as had been his intention at first. They were not aware of any change in him. He had scarcely been aware of the change himself, that change which rendered impossible a resumption of the narrower life of college. He had tasted responsibility, danger, success. He could not nourish his soul on weaker foods. He tramped on into the dusk, thinking seriously. He had saved a respectable little sum even from his moderate salary. But with a certain fine shame for the easy selfishness of his other years, he resolved he would not use this for his own benefit.

"It shall go to help Dona," he thought, "it shall put her through some of the Art course she's pining for. Why, Dona had about one frock a year that I might go to college! She shall have her Art lessons."

Her last letter crackled in his pocket. He thought of how her long plaits would swing with excitement; of the flush that would rise to her little fair face, of the glow in her eyes when she knew. A mist drew over his own eyes. He had not seen his people for so many months. "God bless 'em all," thought Alan in the midst of his generous schemes.

But this did not assure his own course. His uncle, he knew, would help him to the utmost. But his uncle had already helped him so much that Alan was somewhat anxious to begin to help himself. He strode along the edge of the silent woods, thinking, thinking.

A twig cracked sharply behind him and a footstep rustled in the dried leaves. He swung sheer about in the surprise of the moment, and faced a tall dark figure that had drawn up silently behind him. Another moment and—"Hullo, Mac," said he, in a relieved voice; "how you did make me jump! I'm just out for a breather."

"So am I," replied Macpherson, falling into a stride beside him. "I saw you start off and trailed you. Our work won't last us so very long, Hope."

"Just what I was thinking," said Alan, surprised at Macpherson's abrupt beginning.

"Did I ever tell you," asked the long man, after walking for a time in silence, "did I ever tell you why I have not got on better—why, I mean, that I don't hold a better position? It's because I can't settle down. I'm restless, restless. Maybe I'd have been a partner of your uncle's now if I could but settle down. But I can't. You've never seen me like this before, have you? I think I must be half a gypsy. I've been too

long in touch with civilization. I've been civilized for two years. I may stick out the winter, but it's all up with me in the spring." Alan listened, surprised and troubled. Never had the saturnine Macpherson shown him so much of his real feelings before. The confidence touched him, the unrest in his friend's voice disturbed him.

"I've been tied to towns too long," cried Macpherson waving his hand towards the lighted camp beneath them. Alan smiled. Westaway, Landport, the camp,—these had not struck him as being oppressively civilized before. "In a little while I shall choke. I want some work that'll take me far away, far off, into the North somewhere—my North. This country's too crowded—forests and farms almost always in sight somewhere. I want my North again. You don't know what the hunger for the North is like, you fellows who come from brick houses and asphalt streets. If I couldn't get what I want any other way, I chuck over everything and join the Mounted Police, and so I told Price."

He was silent again, his loose stride taking him on so fast that even Alan had hard work to keep up without resorting to a trot. The lad was filled with wondering silence, not unsympathetic. He had heard before of that wild hunger that awoke in the hearts of those men upon whom lay the spell of the great North, land of wide, wild spaced, of wider, wilder skies. He had heard of this, and at the thought something began to beat responsively in his own heart.

"But I think there is a way," said Macpherson. "If we don't get a very bad winter, Price will push the

Road through and be fairly finished by the spring.
And in the spring there's a survey starting, up North.
In the spring! You've never seen April in the North,
Alan, you've never seen it."

"I'd like to," said Alan under his breath.

"And if I go on that survey," said Macpherson suddenly, "will you come too? I'll get you on."

"Come?" cried Alan, "will I come? I'll come as your axeman, if nothing better offers! Oh, Mac, Mac, you are good to think of me!"

"Nonsense!" said Macpherson, withdrawing into the shell of reserve that was his soul's accustomed habitation. "You're a good lad, Hope, in the main, and you want to get on. You have lots to learn yet, but the comfort is that you know it—now. I was wild with Price at first for giving you a job. 'Loading that namby-pamby numskull in patent boots on to me!' I told him. 'Wait and see,' said he to me, 'there's stuff in the lad somewhere.' 'A long way out o' sight, then,' said I. But I did you an injustice. There's nothing shows a man's quality like his way of meeting the daily happenings of work like this. You met 'em well. I soon acknowledged to Price," he finished judicially, "that you had some promising capabilities in your character."

But Alan scarcely heeded him. His thoughts had flown to that preliminary survey that would start in the spring. He was happy, full of thankfulness that his chosen career was opening before him in a bright glow of promise. He looked back upon himself as he had been less than a year ago with a wonder not wholly untouched with shame. How the horizon of his life

had broadened since then! He did not fully realise that the bounds of his character had broadened as greatly. He came out of his dream with a start as Macpherson spoke again.

"I told Price of this survey," said he, "and he was very willing you should go. It'll be northward ho! in the spring, Hope!"

They turned down again towards the line, where the rails were beginning to glimmer under the keen starlight. Here they found Donald Price and his partner prowling about in the cutting, and the air was heavy with all manner of technicalities. "Very little more blasting," the contractor was saying, "for which I'm thankful, as the men *will* thaw out the dynamite in the cook-house oven if they get a chance, and you never know what's going to happen."

He saw Alan at his side and turned with a smile, peering at the boy's glowing face. "So Mac has been telling you?" he asked.

"He said he'd come as an axeman if he couldn't come as anything else," remarked Macpherson, shaking hands with Merrick.

"Wonderful the change you've wrought in that youngster," said Merrick in what was meant for an undertone, but which rang again in the shallow cutting. "I was much disappointed in him at first, but he's shaping up well."

Alan and Donald Price both laughed, which did not disconcert Mr. Merrick in the least. "Did you overhear?" he asked Alan. "I was saying to Mr. Macpherson how much you'd improved. Hope you don't mind it from a man old enough to be your father,



"THE CONTRACTOR WATCHED HIM WITH KEEN UNDERSTANDING."

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my dear fellow?—though I'm rather glad I'm not," he concluded, to himself as he fondly supposed. "He's a size too large."

"Thank you," said Alan, grinning at Macpherson. "I've had good training. Haven't I, Mac?"

"There was room for improvement," grunted Macpherson, "so don't get conceited with yourself."

Alan walked on beside Donald Price, in a glad dream of hopes fulfilled. The contractor watched him with keen understanding and affection. "So you were ready to go as axeman?" he asked. "I went as axeman on my first survey, Alan, so you would only be following in my steps. But I think Mac will get you something better than that. Does your mother know of your changed ideas and your changed plans for the future?"

"Yes," said Alan, "and I think somehow she is pleased, though she will feel my long absences very much. However, there are the two others. I thought she would be surprised when I didn't want to go back to college, but she wasn't. She said she expected it from my other letters. Though I will declare I didn't say anything about it before. I suppose she read between the lines." He laughed a happy laugh, and waved his hand to the rails that stretched away in the darkness. "My life will lie with this sort of things," he cried, "and they are big and clean, aren't they?"

"They're what we make of them," said Donald Price, which sounds a copy-book sort of maxim, Alan, but is true, for all that."

"I shall deal with the big things you have dealt

with," said Alan, eagerly, "and perhaps twenty years hence I shall be able to look back on the long years filled with work, true work, honest work, work that will help the whole country, as you are able to. Perhaps I also shall be able to say, 'Those are my bridges, and they're safe and sure,' or 'I laid that line and it's good,' or 'Every inch of work here is of the best.' I shall be proud when that day comes, Uncle Don, if it is ever to come. I don't think men can fully understand love of their country until they have done work which they know, however indirectly, is for their country's good. The work we have been doing will open up the country, and I'm prouder of having had a little share in building this Road than I was of winning a first-year medal at college. And a turkey-cock," cried Alan with another shout of laughter, "was not in it with me then."

Donald Price smiled, well-pleased, and they walked down the line in silence. Behind them Mr. Merrick and Macpherson, who were as fire and tow, were wrangling cheerfully over explosives, Mac clinging obstinately to dynamite, and Mr. Merrick thunderously upholding a new explosive.

Far, far down the line grew a tiny red spark, blossoming like a flower on the darkness of the night.

"That's Five-Nought-Seven," said Macpherson, "and she's miles away. It's a straight road, isn't it? But Price nearly always chooses the straight road," he finished, laughing.

"The straight road's best," said Price, echoing the laugh.

"Here's to the Straight Road!" cried Alan, waving his cap to the frosty metals and the headlight in the distance. "It's the road I mean to take," he ended softly.

THE END.